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Rich and righteous

17: Economics Issue Much is written and preached about the problem of poverty from a biblical perspective, and much of what is written and preached acknowledges the fact that most poverty does not just happen—it is caused. There are, of course, those who are poor for reasons that have little or no human or moral causation (e.g., as a result of devastating weather, disabling illness, disastrous bereavement, or the aftermath of locusts or blight), but it is still the case, and probably always has been, that the greatest cause of poverty is to be found in a wide range of direct or indirect forms of oppression, greed, and injustice, by which those who are not poor sustain their advantageous position. In other words, in most discussions of wealth and poverty, the rich are the bad guys. And in scholarly discussions about poverty in the Bible, that is also frequently the case. So it may be refreshing to look at the matter from the more unusual angle of our title, “The ‘Righteous Rich’ in the Old Testament,” which may seem somewhat oxymoronic to those immersed in the kind of writing and preaching mentioned above. Righteous and rich are words not often found in each other’s company. Perhaps it is to the familiar rhetoric of Amos that we owe the dominance of the reverse word association, wicked and rich. For it was Amos who challenged a culture in which the rich may well have been using a distorted Deuteronomic logic, claiming that their wealth was a proof of their status of righteousness and blessing before God. On the contrary, thundered Amos, it was the oppressed poor who were “the righteous.” This did not mean that the poor were morally perfect, that they were not sinners like the rest of us, just that they were the ones whom the divine judge’s verdict deemed to be “in the right,” in a situation where the wealthy, by their oppressive actions, were clearly “in the wrong”—that is, where the wealthy were clearly “the wicked.” Amos used the terms in a forensic sense, but the association had an enduring moral flavor, summed up in a deceptively simple and familiar binary alternative: the righteous poor and the wicked rich. Yet clearly the Old Testament has a lot more to say on the subject than we can glean from the prophetic monochrome of Amos. It does not assert that all wealth must have been gained through wickedness. To paraphrase Shakespeare: some are born rich, some achieve riches, and others have riches thrust upon them. And, as the Old Testament would doubtlessly say, some are blessed by God with riches within the framework of covenant obedience. My plan in what follows is first to make a canonical survey, observing some texts relevant to the title in each of the major genres of Old Testament literature, and then, second and more briefly, to make a thematic summary, drawing the threads together in a way which can be fruitfully applied in different contexts by different readers. A Canonical Survey! The Narratives Abraham. The foundational story of Abraham combines wealth with righteousness and puts both under the sign of God’s blessing, for example, “Abram had become very wealthy in livestock and in silver and gold” (Gen. 13:2) and “Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness” (Gen. 15:6). Both of these texts come after the original word of God to Abram (Gen. 12:1-3), in which God promises not only to bless Abram, but also promises that Abram will be a blessing. Indeed, the verb in the last line of Genesis 12:2 is actually in the imperative tense, matching the imperatives of verse 1. The thrust of the whole word is thus: “Go . . . Be a blessing . . . and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”² Abraham is thus the one who receives blessing and is the means of blessing others. This is the context in which his wealth is to be set. It is, in fact, the very first context in which wealth is mentioned at all in the Bible, and its strong connection with the blessing of God is apparent. The connection is even more explicit in the case of Isaac. Following hard on the reminder of God’s promise to bless the world through Abraham because of his obedience (Gen. 26:4-5) comes the record of Isaac’s enrichment under God’s blessing (26:12-13), which even a foreigner acknowledges (26:29). The patriarchal narratives thus portray the righteous rich as those who receive their wealth from God as a token of his blessing, respond in risky faith and costly obedience (see Gen. 22), and participate in God’s mission of blessing others. Given that, as I have said, this is the first substantial appearance of wealth in the Bible, it is important to note that it is set in a very wholesome light—in companionship with covenant, blessing, obedience, and mission. Boaz. Boaz is not actually described as wealthy, but as “a man of standing,” a person of substance in the local community (Ruth 2:1). However, the axis of the story of the book of Ruth is that he is wealthy in comparison with Ruth and Naomi in their need. He possesses land, servants, good harvests, and the spare cash to redeem Elimelech’s land. Nor is Boaz described specifically as righteous, but the character that emerges from the story shows all the marks associated with righteousness in the Old Testament. He acts with kindness to one who was an alien and a widow (one of the commonest exhortations in Israel’s law); he respects her decision to move to the land of Israel and take refuge under the wings of the God of Israel (thus aligning himself with the Abrahamic stance of being a blessing to the nations); he acts with committed and sacrificial faithfulness (hesed) toward his deceased relative, Elimelech, by redeeming the land of Naomi and taking his widowed daughter-in-law Ruth, raising a son to inherit Elimelech’s line rather than his own. Boaz thus fulfils the role of kinsman-redeemer (go’el) and is warmly commended by the local community and blessed by God in the birth of a son who becomes the ancestor of David and eventually of the Messiah, Jesus. Boaz, in using his wealth with risky generosity, stands in contrast to the nearer but nameless kinsman who declines to do his duty for the family for fear of spoiling his own inheritance (4:6; i.e., by having to spend money on raising a potential son who would not inherit his own line). David. The most significant context in which the wealth of King David is discussed is his provision for the building of the temple by his son Solomon in 1 Chronicles 28-29. At this point, one might have to set aside questions regarding the sources of David’s personal wealth, some of which came from tribute imposed upon nations he defeated in his many wars (ironically, the very reason why he was not allowed to build the temple himself; 28:3). The stance of the narrator seems to be that this particular use of David’s wealth, however it was accumulated, is worthy and exemplary. Certainly, David’s example of putting his personal wealth into the temple project (29:2-5) motivates the rest of the leaders to do the same (29:6-8), which then seems to motivate the rest of the people in turn (29:9). The whole act of national giving is then followed by an exemplary prayer: David acknowledges the true source of all wealth (God himself) and the comparative unworthiness of all human giving, which is merely giving back to God what already belongs to him. Insofar as this could be characterized as an example of righteous riches (or at least riches put to the service of righteousness), it is marked by willingness, wholeheartedness, and joy (29:9), along with God-honoring worship, humility, integrity, and honest intent (29:10-17). Solomon. There is much greater ambivalence about the riches of Solomon, which were legendary even in his own day. In one sense, he just stepped into them as the heir of his father, David (though the succession was marked with excesses of conspiracy and violence), and by continuing his policy of exacting tribute from the many nations under his rule (1 Kgs. 4:21). To this Solomon added a trading genius that was highly lucrative but of very questionable legitimacy (1 Kgs. 10:26-29; cf Deut. 17:16-17). So the riches of Solomon are set under a moral question mark, and yet the narrator affirms that he received them also as an unasked-for gift from God, because Solomon had asked for wisdom to rule his people justly (1 Kgs. 3:9-14). So again, insofar as the wealth of Solomon had any tinge of righteousness, it lay in its early connection with his desire to do justice and his express prioritizing of wisdom over wealth in itself. Sadly, the later Solomon was tinged with everything but righteousness, and his wealth came to constitute a symbol of oppression and an entring snare to his successors, Nehemiah. Nehemiah 5 records an incident of public protest against a range of unjust and oppressive economic practices in the post-exilic community, of which Nehemiah was governor, and the actions that Nehemiah took in righteous anger to rectify them. In the public arena, Nehemiah’s action turned around a situation that was “not right” (Neh. 5:9). But Nehemiah goes on to record his own personal example in handling his finances. Whether his self-commendation is quite to our taste or not, we should concede that his refusal to exploit his political office for private gain, or to allow his entourage to live in burdensome luxury and excess, is a token of righteousness in his handling of the wealth to which his position gave him access (Neh. 5:14-19). The Law Given that so much of Israel’s law in the Pentateuch is orientated toward life in the land, economic relationships, principles, and practices are prominent. This is not the place for a survey of the wide range of such material, but I will consider a few texts that specifically refer to the righteous (or otherwise) use of personal wealth.³ The Old Testament regards it as a fundamental duty of those who have wealth to be willing to lend to the poor. Lending is not in itself associated with exploitation but is a mark of righteousness. However, the key distinction between righteous and unrighteous lending is the matter of interest. Among the marks of the one who is “blameless” and “righteous” is that he lends his money but does so without demanding interest (Psalm 15:2, 5). To lend is to prioritize the need of the poor person by making one’s wealth available to him. To demand interest is to prioritize one’s personal profit by exploiting the poor person’s need. Leviticus. Set within a whole raft of legislation designed to address the threat of impoverishment, Leviticus 25:35-38 puts responsibility on the better-off kinsman to provide practical support to the kinsman who is sinking into poverty. Interest-free loans are the recommended method at this stage. As throughout the chapter, this action is motivated by a sense of vertical obligation to the God who delivered them from the Israelites from Egypt. Rightness in the Old Testament includes a right response to the saving action of God; part of that right response is generous care for the poor. Deuteronomy. Lending was a duty in Old Testament Israel, but it was also to be carried out humanely in a way that would respect the dignity and privacy of the debtor. Therefore, the laws in Deuteronomy 24:6, 10-13 address the creditor and call for certain restraints and limits to be observed in the financial transaction and its social implications. In other words, and contrary to common practice, the bottom line is not the only thing that counts in God’s sight. Other laws relate to spiritual and attitudinal dimensions of wealth. For example, Deuteronomy 8 is a chapter that puts all personal wealth in the context of the “prevenient” grace of God’s gift of the land. Israel must remember how they were led out of need and poverty into the abundance of the land. The emphasis up to verse 10 is that sufficiency of material goods should generate praise to God. The emphasis shifts somewhat from verse 11 to 14, with the warning that a surplus of goods can quickly generate pride in oneself. That pride is expressed with sharp perception in the boasting of verse 17: “You may say to yourself, ‘My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.’” But the bubble of self-congratulation is immediately pricked in verse 18, “But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth.” The righteous rich remember where their wealth has come from. To forget this is the first step to pride and all the greed and injustice that flows from it. Deuteronomy 15, in my view, is the warm heartbeat of the whole book. It expands some of the basic laws from Exodus concerning sabbatical fallow on the land and the release of Hebrew slaves, but it does so in a way that exudes a spirit of generosity and compassion: If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your poor brother. Rather be open-handed and freely lend him whatever he needs. [. . .] Give generously to him and do so without a grudging eye [. . .] there will always be poor people in the land [or in the earth]. Therefore I command you to be open-handed toward your brothers and toward your poor and your needy in your land. (Deut. 15:7-11, my translation) This text combines a strong use of body language (heart, hand/fist, eye) with a strongly relational dimension (“you”) is repeated emphatically in a way that some English translations obscure). The righteous rich recognize that the poor are brothers whose need is not only to be helped, but to belong; not to be marginalized into a social category (the poor), but to be held within the bonds of community participation (your poor). Righteousness is relational, not abstract, impersonal, or at an arm’s length. Releasing a Hebrew slave after six years is to be “celebrated” (not begrudged), with a parting gift that will not only sustain the freed slave through the transition, but even honor and bless him in a way that reflects God’s blessing on the owner. When you release him, do not send him away empty-handed. “Garland him” (lit.) from your flock, your threshing floor and your winepress. Give to him as the LORD your God has blessed you. (Deut. 15:15, my translation) That final sentence could have fallen from the lips of Jesus. The righteous rich are consciously motivated by constant recall of how much they themselves owe to God.4 Psalms I have already illustrated that lending without interest is one mark of the righteousness that can stand in the presence of God (Ps. 15:5), and Ezekiel confirms this and condemns the opposite as wickedness (Ezek. 18:8, 13, 17). Psalm 37 is a lengthy reflection, in Wisdom mode, on the contrasting behavior, attitudes, and destiny of the righteous and the wicked. Among other things, it warns the righteous not to envy the prosperity of the unrighteous rich, with the proverbial comparison that “Better the little that the righteous have / than the wealth of many wicked (v. 16).” Like other parts of the Wisdom literature, Psalm 37 deals more with general principles than with all the nasty details of life (verse 25 might lead us to reckon that the author needed to get out more). But it certainly has a view of how the righteous should behave in relation to whatever riches they might have. For example, “The wicked borrow and do not repay, / but the righteous give generously” (v. 21) and “[The righteous] are always generous and lend freely; their children will be blessed (v. 26).” Psalm 112 strikes an identical chord but with the extra harmonics that the generosity of the righteous is a mirroring of the generosity of the LORD himself. Note how Psalm 112:3-5 (and 9), about the righteous God who delivered them from the Israelites from Egypt. Rightness in the Old Testament includes a right response to the saving action of God; part of that right response is generous care for the poor. Deuteronomy. Lending was a duty in Old Testament Israel, but it was also to be carried out humanely in a way that would respect the dignity and privacy of the debtor. Therefore, the laws in Deuteronomy 24:6, 10-13 address the creditor and call for certain restraints and limits to be observed in the financial transaction and its social implications. 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Far more important is wisdom—the wisdom that comes from God: Choose my instruction instead of silver, knowledge rather than choice gold, for wisdom is more precious than rubies, and nothing you desire can compare with her. (Prov. 8:10-11, cf. 16:16) As we saw, Solomon knew this in his humbler youth (1 Kgs. 3) but sadly forgot it rather quickly. The upright also recognize that wealth is in any case no protection against death (Prov. 11:4), a relativizing perception that is amplified in even more melancholy tones in Ecclesiastes 5:13-6:6. The dominant note in relation to righteous riches in Proverbs, however, is one that is completely consistent with the law and the prophets, namely the requirement to treat the poor with kindness and without contempt, mockery, or callousness. Interestingly, however, whereas the law and prophets ground such teaching in the history of Israel’s redemption (specifically in God’s saving generosity in the exodus), the Wisdom tradition tends to appeal to the broader foundation of creation. Disparities of human wealth are ultimately irrelevant to our standing before God. Rich and poor have a created equality as human beings before God. Consequently, whatever attitude or action the rich adopt toward the poor, they actually adopt toward God (with all that entails). The righteous rich are therefore those who see their God when they look at the poor man made in God’s image: “He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, / but whoever is kind to the needy honours God” (Prov. 14:31). This is a note that can be heard echoing through the following texts: Proverbs 17:5, 19:17, 22:2, 22, 29:7, 13. As we saw in Psalm 37, the Wisdom writers cared more about justice than about prosperity, a perspective which they summarized in the opinion that it was far preferable to be poor but righteous than to have ill-gotten wealth through injustice and oppression (Prov. 16:8; 28:6). One final perspective worth mentioning is the value of contentment with sufficiency. Neither excessive poverty nor excessive wealth are desirable, for both are a temptation to behave in ways that disown or dishonor God. The implication seems to be that the righteous rich know when to say, “Enough is enough”: Give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, “Who is the LORD?” Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God. (Prov. 30:8-9) Job. For any lingering doubts that righteousness and riches could ever inhabit the same universe, Job is the classic proof. Indeed, the three opening verses of the book affirm both truths about him: Job was a model of righteousness (“blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil”), and he was simultaneously very wealthy—a legend in his own time. The former is a verdict endorsed even by God himself (1:8, 2:3). The latter is cynically offered by Satan (the accuser) as an alleged mercenary motive. Job would not be so righteous, he sneers, if he were not being so richly blessed by God. So the test to which Job is unwittingly exposed is to see if his righteousness (which he more often describes as his integrity) will survive the loss of all his substance, even his health. And it does. But in the course of his self-defence, Job describes the kind of life he had led before the calamity that befell him. In doing so, he sheds considerable ethical light on how those who are blessed by God with wealth beyond what is common can at the same time behave in ways that God himself will own as righteous beyond comparison. Chapters 29 and 31 are particularly rich in righteousness. Job 29 describes his life “when God’s intimate friendship blessed my house,” that is, in the days of his wealth and social standing. As one of those who exercised justice in the local courts, Job claims that he had rescued the poor and defended the orphan and widow, that he had been eyes to the blind, feet to the lame, father to the needy, champion of the stranger, and scourge of the wicked (29:12-17). The mark of righteous riches is when those who possess them use the social power they confer for the benefit of the powerless and to confound those who victimize them. Job 31, Job’s final and prolonged moral apologia, contains several specific references to his use of, or attitude toward, his wealth. In summary: he had used it generously (31:16-20); he had not placed ultimate security in it (31:24-25); he had put it hospitably at the service of others (31:31-32); and he had not gained it through merciless exploitation of his own workers (31:38-40). There is much here for ethical reflection, particularly for those who are blessed with riches and are seeking to act righteously in handling them. The Prophets The prophets’ condemnations of those who had gained their wealth by injustice, and used their wealth to perpetuate further injustice, is pervasive. Only rarely do we get glimpses of prophetic approval of those who are righteous in their attitude and actions in relation to wealth. There was no love lost between Jeremiah and King Jehoikim. In condemning his unscrupulous self-enrichment at the expense of unpaid workers, his competitive greed and conspicuous opulence, Jeremiah contrasts the unworthy new king with his godly father, King Josiah. As king, Josiah doubtless also enjoyed his share of royal wealth, but Jeremiah seems to refer to a more modest lifestyle when he says, “Did not your father have food and drink? He did what was right and just, so all went well with him. He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. Is that not what it means to know me?” declares the LORD. (Jer. 2:15-16) Again, we note that the central key to righteousness in the handling of riches is enacting justice for the poor. That alone is the path to well-being. These verses also give sharp insight into what Jeremiah meant by “knowing God”—all the more important since he will later include the knowledge of God as one of the major blessings of the new covenant (Jer. 31:34). Knowing God is not just a matter of personal piety, but also the exercise of practical justice. The link with knowing God is further developed by Jeremiah in a beautifully crafted small poem: he sets three of God’s best gifts on one side of the scales (wisdom, strength, and riches) and declares that none of them (God-given though they may be) are to be boasted of. For they pale in comparison with the privilege of knowing Yahweh as God—and knowing that his primary delight lies in the three things that Jeremiah puts in the other side of the scales, the doing of kindness, justice, and righteousness on earth (Jer. 9:23-24). So the righteous rich do not boast of their riches; rather, they relativize them in comparison with knowing God and loving what he loves. Finally, Ezekiel echoes Psalm 15 when he includes, among the characteristics of the model righteous person, the assertion that all his economic dealings are generous, rather than oppressive, caring rather than self-interested (Ezek. 18:7-8). A Thematic Summary As we saw at the very beginning, God may choose (but is not obliged) to make a righteous person rich. But what, in the light of our survey, makes a rich person righteous? At least the following summary points would seem to emerge from the Old Testament’s reflections on this matter, with all its different moods and voices. The righteous rich are those who: • Remember the source of their riches—namely the grace and gift of God himself—and are therefore not boastingly inclined to take the credit for achieving them through their own skill, strength, or effort (even if these things have been legitimately deployed) (Deut. 8:17-18, 1 Chr. 29:11-12, Jer. 9:23-24). • Do not idolize their wealth by putting inordinate trust in it nor get anxious about losing it. For ultimately, it is one’s relationship with God that matters more and can survive (and even be deepened by) the absence or loss of wealth (Job 31:24-25). • Recognize that wealth is thus secondary to many things, including wisdom, but especially personal integrity, humility, and righteousness (1 Chron. 29:17, Prov. 8:10-11, 1 Kgs. 3, Prov. 16:8; 28:6). • Set their wealth in the context of God’s blessing, recognizing that being blessed is not a privilege but a responsibility—the Abrahamic responsibility of being a blessing to others (Gen. 12:1-3). Wealth in righteous hands is thus a servant of that mission that flows from God’s commitment to bless the nations through the seed of Abraham. • Use their wealth with justice; this includes refusing to extract personal benefit by using wealth for corrupt ends (e.g., through bribery) and ensuring that all one’s financial dealings are non-exploitative of the needs of others (e.g., through interest, Ps. 15:5, Ezek. 18:7-8). • Make their wealth available to the wider community through responsible lending that is both practical (Lev. 25) and respectful to the dignity of the debtor (Deut. 24:6, 10-13). • See wealth as an opportunity for generosity—even when it is risky, and even when it hurts, thereby both blessing the poor and needy, and at the same time reflecting the character of God (Deut. 15, Ps. 112:3, Prov. 14:31, 19:17, Ruth). • Use wealth in the service of God, whether by contributing to the practical needs that are involved in corporate worship of God (1 Chron. 28-9) or by providing for God’s servants who particularly need material support (2 Chron. 31, Ruth). • Set an example by limiting personal consumption and declining to maximize private gain from public office that affords access to wealth and resources (Neh. 5:14-19). The person who is characterized in these ways can indeed qualify for the otherwise oxymoronic epithet “righteous rich.” Above all, it is because such a person is marked by the very first principle of wisdom, namely the fear of the LORD, that the blessings he enjoys are not tainted with wickedness and the whiff of oppression. “Blessed is the man who fears the LORD,” for if riches also come his way by God’s grace, then the double truth can be affirmed of him, without contradiction: Wealth and riches are in his house, and his righteousness endures for ever. (Psalm 112:3) Notes Click the images at the bottom of the Notes section to purchase these books from Amazon.com and help support The Other Journal. 1. I have chosen to follow the loose order of the English Bible rather than the stricter order of the Hebrew canon—Law, Prophets, and Writings. 2. God’s command to Abraham has as much claim to the phrase “The Great Commission” as the end of Matthew’s gospel. It launches the history of the mission of God (to bless the nations) through the mission of God’s people (to be blessed and to be the means of blessing). 3. I have, however, tried to cover it fairly thoroughly in Christopher J. H. Wright, Old Testament Ethics for the People of God (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2004). See also Wright, God’s People in God’s Land (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1990). 4. For a fuller discussion of the profound social implications of this chapter, see Christopher J.H. Wright, Deuteronomy, New International Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996).

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