

Talk given at Diakonia, Durban, Sept 12, 2007

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## 1. The Bible and economics.

If we are going to participate as Churches in debates about the economy in South Africa then we need to think about the Bible and economics. This is important for two reasons. First, many Christians find it very difficult to be involved in things unless there is a clear Biblical perspective. Thus it is difficult for activists to motivate the church to be engaged unless they can see the connections with Scripture. Secondly, if we as church have anything special and specific to offer the public debate about economics, then it will come from the wisdom of the Scriptures. There is no point in the churches simply saying what other people can say, because they can normally say it better than us! Our unique voice is the ability to bring centuries of wisdom about human life in the Bible to bear on our context.

So the question is: Does the Bible speak about economics? And the surprising answer is: Yes. At the launch of the *Oikos Journey*, I pointed out to the people who gathered:

Did you know that in the New Testament, 1 out of every 16 verses has to do with wealth and poverty? In fact in the first three gospels it is the subject of 1 in 10 verses, compared to prayer which is the subject of only 1 in every 52 verses. In the Gospel of Luke it is the subject of 1 in every 7 verses, whereas prayer is only 1 out of 42.

On this basis, the *Oikos Journey* has looked at the Bible and asked about what the Bible might teach us about economics. We understood that there is such a thing as God's plan for the way the world should be structured, ensuring harmony between human activity and ecological principles. We called this 'God's economy', and we have identified seven things that the Bible tells us about God's economy:

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| 1. The Earth is full of grace and love.              | Psalms 24:1        |
| 2. Labour is both a blessing and a curse.            | Genesis 2:15, 3:17 |
| 3. Sabbath is the fundamental rule of God's economy. | Exodus 20:8-10     |
| 4. Shared prosperity is the goal of God's economy.   | Isaiah 58          |
| 5. We cannot serve both God and Mammon.              | Matthew 6:24       |
| 6. God's economy is a matter of discipleship.        | Matthew 19:16-22   |
| 7. We are called to live long on the land.           | Deut 25:13-16.     |

These things are covered in some depth in the *Oikos Journey* itself, so I am not going to spend the time repeating what is already there. Here I would like to engage with a challenge from Dr Theo Kneiffel who has spoken here in this hall about the *Oikos Journey*, and particularly its Biblical framework. I see that his paper is included in the documents you have received in your files, and I would encourage you to read it. If you look there you will see that he said two important things about the Biblical framework.

First he was very positive. He wrote: "There is a whole chapter on the Seven Biblical Principles on God's economy. There I resonate very strong with this. I think it is excellent..." Then he challenged us. He wrote: "... but I find it difficult to agree with the 'principles' because principles are always general, they are vague in a way and non-committal. (page 5). He then spoke about theological paradigms and went on to say:

Let me suggest some of those theological paradigms and you have some of them here: The Creation paradigm, and the Liberation paradigm but may I say (being somebody who comes from the Liberation paradigm) the *Oikos Journey* comes from the Creation paradigm because of the focus on environmental issues which, out of respect, I would have turned it a little differently. I dare to say the Liberation paradigm is the first paradigm in the bible because Exodus comes before creation not chronologically in a sense of dogma, but the sense of formation of the people of Israel but this of course can be debated. (page 6)

## 2. The Promised Land Paradigm.

I would like to take Theo up on his invitation to debate this. I do this because I think that he has allowed himself to be trapped in an unnecessary dichotomy between a 'creation' and a 'liberation' paradigm, and he has also failed to see that there are at least two other paradigms in the Bible that shape the issues of economics. My sense is that he has been a bit simplistic with his theology here. And so I want to debate with his argument – not to make academic points – but to help all of us take the discussion forward. And I wish that he was here to engage with us because I value his perspective and I know he would help us on these issues. But failing this we will have to deal with his written words.

First, he is correct to say that in the history of Israel the liberation experience comes before theological reflection on creation. But precisely because these things emerge from contextual experience they resonate with our context in different ways. Just because something comes first in the bible doesn't give it priority in every context. One could just as easily say to Theo: "Yes, precisely, we too have experienced liberation first. Now we need to deal with other issues for which the exodus narratives are not adequate. Just as Israel had to journey on, so we also need to journey on. We cannot forever live as escaped slaves. We need to live as free people in a free and promised land."

Second, I think Theo has missed something about African theology; namely that there are at least two other paradigms that we work with go beyond the two he has mentioned, and that seek to integrate them. These are the 'Reconstruction' paradigm, in the work of people like Jesse Mugambi of Kenya; and what I would call the 'Promised Land' paradigm. Not everything can be analysed simplistically as being either the Liberation or the Creation paradigm. Besides, our reality in Africa suggests that we cannot separate these two as easily as it may be in Europe. Because of colonialism, the liberation struggle is about the Land – and land is part of God's creation. So to struggle for the land means both paying attention to questions of freedom and liberation, and questions of creation and ecology. To take back the land is one thing. To look after it for the next generations is another thing. The *Oikos Journey* is interested in both.

And so thirdly, I think that when Theo says the *Oikos Journey* is based on the Creation paradigm, I think he is wrong. I suppose I can say that with some confidence because I was very involved in the process and I have inside information about where we were coming from. I would say that the biblical framework of the *Oikos Journey* is in fact built on the 'Promised Land' paradigm. What I mean is that the thinking about the economy does not come from Creation, or Exodus, or Reconstruction after the exile; but it comes as a reflection on what the People of Israel understood that they were doing when they crossed the Jordan river and took possession of the land. In this sense it is an integration of the Creation and Liberation paradigms.

The Liberation paradigm is interested in freedom *from* something. The Promised Land paradigm is interested in freedom *for* something. That 'thing' is how to live well and long on the land. It is not a question of how to overcome something like Pharaoh, or apartheid; but how to build a life and a world that is worth handing on to your children. It is about building a home or a household, an *Oikos*. Clearly the Promised Land paradigm can only come after the Liberation experience, and as we will see is rooted in it. But it is trying to deal with a new context, and so adds something. That something is the search to live in harmony with God's economy upon God's earth, to put together liberation and creation.

To illustrate this integration let me focus on something that the Government quite rightly sees as a sign of its commitment to the lives of the poor - namely the way it has enabled many communities to shift from the 'bucket system' to water borne sewerage systems. From the point of view of the struggle against the dehumanizing conditions of apartheid and poverty this is to be celebrated. But, no-one seems to be asking about where the water will come from for these new systems, because South Africa is a water-stressed country, and poor communities don't always have access to adequate water (and especially if you allow water to be privatised). You simply cannot avoid the integration of economics and ecology on this issue. A water borne sewerage system without water will in fact make life much worse for poor communities, and this reminds us that we cannot separate liberation from creation.

### 3. Visioning the Promised Land.

There would be lots of ways of thinking about the Promised Land paradigm, but I thought today I would just look at the most well known set of rules for setting up life in the Promised Land - the Ten Commandments. And I will read them - briefly - from the perspective of God's economy. I think we could be quite surprised by what we find there. Here I am using the commandments as presented in Exodus 20

We need to understand where this is coming from. The People of Israel have been freed from slavery. They are wondering what is in store for them. They are preparing to live a new way in the world, and God is laying out the rules for God's economy; in other words what God wants them to do so that they can live in justice and harmony with each other and the earth, the 'land flowing with milk and honey'. There are many rules that he gives them, but they are summed up in the Ten Commandments. Let us read them as they were intended to be read: rules about how to live in the Promised Land in such a way that they do not reproduce the economic injustice from which God has had to free them.

1. *I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. (vs. 2,3)*

In the English bibles, when you see LORD in capitals, that is the way 'Yahweh' is translated, as opposed to Lord, which is the translation for the more general term 'Adonai'. So it is important to note that this commandment is not just about believing in God in some vague way, but it is about believing in Yahweh against other gods. In other words it is about the kind of God who is to be followed. This is the God who is the Liberator God. The God who is identified by only one characteristic: He is against slavery; and slavery is an economic mode of production. So straight away we see that the Ten Commandments are rooted in economics, for the identity of the God who is to be honoured and obeyed is known by only one thing: his attitude towards economic systems.

2. *You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them. (vs 4, 5a)*

Yahweh, the liberator God who is at the heart of the Ten Commandments, is a jealous God. If we miss the economic point about the first commandment then we will domesticate this commandment also. There are two points here. (i) God recognises that the expectations of a liberator God will be hard to keep up with; and that there will be a temptation to make idols. Idols are gods made in our image, and they therefore do not challenge us and push us. They comfort us and legitimate our interests. (ii) Second there is also the issue of worshiping the products of our labour, our commodities. The economy is there to serve us, not for us to serve or worship. Idols, as products of our hands and our labour, are economic products. As Jesus would say around the same issue: "You cannot serve both God and mammon", which is the fifth biblical principle in the Oikos Journey.

3. *You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. (vs 7)*

People who worship idols are not pretending to worship Yahweh, the Liberator God. But God knew that there would also be people who with their lips would worship Yahweh, but would do so to legitimate their own interests. They would not honour the freedom they had won through God. Thus the third commandment deals with this - with clever people who use the name of Yahweh, but who do so for the wrong reasons. Given what we have seen so far as to how God primarily identifies himself in the Ten Commandments from an economic point of view as being against slavery, it is clear that those who misuse his name are likely to do so from an economic point of view. Here I think of things like the Prosperity Gospel, or the legitimization of capitalism as if God is happy with these things.

4. *Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work--you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it. (vs 8-11)*

This is the heart of God's economy, as the *Oikos Journey* rightly points out. This is perhaps the most misunderstood of the commandments, because we have turned it into a spiritual rule when in fact it is so obvious it is an economic rule. It is about labour and rest, and specifically rest for those who work for you. It is the commandment that says that human beings are not machines, they are not simply part of the equation of production to produce commodities. Human beings are human beings created in the image of God and given the talents to be co-creators with God. Therefore they need the space to rest and enjoy the produce of their labour, much like God on the seventh day. And this is the way that Jesus interprets this commandment. (Mark 2:27) This is what is wrong with slavery, and what is wrong with neo-liberal capitalism. The economy is there to serve humanity, not the other way round.

Now the next five commandments touch on quite broad ethical and moral principles that deal with things beyond just economics. But as we shall see they all have something important to say about economic systems and economic relationships.

5. *Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you. (vs 12)*

This commandment can be read as a silly mathematical equation – if you honour your parents then you will live to a ripe age. But we have many examples to make us realise this cannot be the case. Rather I think this is a commandment about the fact that our economic prosperity should be shared within the household, and by extension, the community, if we want to live long in the land. We need an economic system that is not an individualistic one; one that focuses on the individual at the expense of the family or the village, or the community. If we are to live long on the land, in other words to have inter-generational sustainability, then we need to respect this wider network of relationships.

6. *You shall not murder. (v 13).*

This commandment is very clearly an ethical commandment that goes beyond just economics. But it does have an economic angle because it suggests that we should not support an economic system that kills people. It is clear that our current global economic system creates huge wealth for some people; but it also creates poverty and misery for many others. Our economic system stands judged by one simple question: is it promoting life or is it promoting death? (i) On the one hand we should be reminded that perhaps the most globally traded item in the capitalist system is weapons, and so the global economy is deeply implicated in murder and has no internal value system to oppose this. (ii) On the other hand, we see the way in which an economy does not come to the support of those who are sick, weak, malnourished, injured. It is comfortable for them to die.

7. *You shall not commit adultery (v 14)*

This commandment, like the previous one, concerns more than just economics. But it also has an economic edge to it, because our current economic system is very comfortable with sex as a tradable commodity. Surely something is wrong with an economic system where a young woman can make more money by selling her body for sex than by being a teacher

or a nurse. Or that men have money to dispose of in these ways. Our capitalist system in and of itself is not able to promote values that are human values. It seems to honour anything that is willing to be bought or sold.

8. *You shall not steal (v. 15)*

Again, this goes beyond just economics – but in this case, of course, stealing is by definition an economic crime. It is taking what is not genuinely yours. We can individualise it and think of it as the criminal who steals from the rich. Clearly this stands judged. But it also has to do with stealing land, water, labour, minerals, ideas, etc. and these are the ways in which rich people steal. Once we start to look at the economy from this perspective we see how much of it stands judged by this command. God knew that if there was to be justice and sustainability in the Promised Land, then this was to be a principle to be adhered to.

9. *You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour. (v 16)*

We should speak the truth in all circumstances, not just in economics. But of course this commandment has a strong economic aspect to it. God knew that truth is at the heart of justice, and in the economic arena contracts were to be taken seriously, lies were not to be told to disadvantage a neighbour, and bribery and corruption were not allowed. I wonder, also, to what extent the marketing and advertising industry is able to stand up to the standards of truth?

10. *You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor. (vs 17)*

This commandment brings us back directly to economics, and to questions of greed. God is making clear to the People of God as they are about to cross the Jordan that they cannot have an economic system based upon greed and the acquisition of things that rightfully belong to one's neighbour. So much of the contemporary economic system is based on a dog-eat-dog approach in which I am rewarded by trying to take as much from my neighbour as I can. As the *Oikos Journey* makes clear, this is God's earth and it is full of grace and love. We deny God's grace and providence when we set out to take from our neighbour.

4. The Promised Land and Conquest.

I would hope that this exploration of the Ten Commandments from an economic point of view will help us see that the *Oikos Journey* emerges from a Promised Land paradigm. We know that God has set us free from apartheid. We might feel like we are wandering around in the wilderness at present. But we know that we are on the edge of the promised land. What we learn from the Exodus story is that the freedom that is won against Pharaoh is very fragile and that God had to lay down some very clear rules for life in the Promised Land so as to make sure that this freedom was not lost. At the heart of those rules we find God's economy. God's *oikos-nomos*. God's rules for the home – the *Oikos* – of the Promised Land.

Perhaps before we get too excited we need to deal with a concern that could be raised, namely that the Promised Land paradigm is deeply rooted in the idea of the conquest and the overthrowing of the indigenous people of the land. In this sense it is a paradigm of violence and colonialism. A few things can be noted here.

First, this concern rightly points to the weakness of any metaphor or paradigm, even a biblical one. It helps us understand some things, but not other things. It is rooted in the politics and struggles of the Ancient Middle East, and we must not be naïve about uncritically taking something from the past and relating it to our contemporary situation.

Then, there is a strong element of contemporary Old Testament scholarship that suggests that the conquest of the Promised Land was not that of an ethnic war (Israelites against Canaanites), but of the group of escaped slaves who believed in a liberator God (Yahweh), making alliances with the poor and dispossessed in Canaan and fighting with them against the oppressive rulers of the land so as to set up and establish a free country under the rules of Yahweh.

Third, other scholars have pointed out how little war-making the people actually engage in, and where they do, God works hard to make them understand that it is God and not human might that wins the battle (For example the battle of Jericho). Time and again they must learn: "Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the LORD of hosts". (Zechariah 4:6)

Finally, therefore, we need to root the Promised Land paradigm in the language of Jesus, namely the Kingdom of God. For the Old Testament vision of the Promised Land had its difficulties, and in fact it did not take long before the rules of God's economy were ignored and abused. The prophets sought to bring the people back to the rules, but their protestations were also ignored. God's incarnation in Jesus is a powerful proclamation of his continuing commitment to God's economy of freedom. The Kingdom of God deepens and broadens the idea of the Promised Land so that it relates not just to a small geographic space in the Middle East, but to the earth as a whole. That is why Jesus taught us to pray, "Thy Kingdom come on earth ..."

## 5. Conclusion.

The Church is called upon to proclaim hope. This hope is rooted in the Gospel, God's good news about our human condition. This means we need to be very clear about what we are proclaiming because we stand under judgment if we proclaim something that is less than hope or is shown to be a false hope. That is why we need as a church to be very careful about proclaiming a particular policy of a human government or political party to be the hope of the poor. We need to subject it to Biblical scrutiny, so that we can be assured that what we are proclaiming is in fact rooted in the gospel, the Good News of what God would want us to say today.

This is the challenge to the Church in our context of poverty today. Let us continue on the journey!