Idolatry and Redemption: Economics in Biblical Perspective  
By Prof Tim Gorringe, March 2013

Since we are all beholden to him let’s begin with Adam Smith and understand economics as the study of the way in which human communities obtain ‘the necessities and conveniences of life’. In the course of human history many different forms of economy have been pursued and they can be measured both by their effectiveness in producing the means of life, by their sustainability, and according to the equity of their distribution. If we are talking about justice we are focussed primarily on equity and sustainability, but the question of the promotion of human flourishing cannot be ignored either. Justice, in Scripture, goes beyond equity to the establishment of shalom:

For the palace will be forsaken,  
The populous city deserted…  
Until a spirit from on high is poured out on us,  
And the wilderness becomes a fruitful field.  
Then justice (mishpat) will dwell in the wilderness,  
And righteousness abide in the fruitful field.  
The effect of justice (tsedequah) will be peace (shalom),  
And the result of justice, quietness and trust for ever.(Is 32 14-17)

Shalom, as we know, is not peace as absence of conflict, but extends to flourishing, or as Deuteronomy puts it, that situation where ‘there will be no poor amongst you’.(Dt 15.4) Social justice, it is usually said, is about the distribution of costs and benefits but the crucial question is how we determine who pays what costs, what we count as benefits, and who gets them. The question of justice, in other words is about the criteria by which we evaluate economic practice. This is not simply an ethical question but also a theological one as we see from the fact that most forms of economy – right up to today – have sought theological legitimation: In God we Trust! Such claims to legitimacy are usually a sign of strain: you do not need to legitimise what is self evident. The endless braying about freedom and democracy over the past sixty years have largely been a cover for the contradiction between abstract views of equality on the one hand and the actual result of economic systems on the other, which have included the overthrow of democratic regimes, widespread torture and the despoliation of the earth. In the war of ideologies Scripture plays its part but, you can ask, what can we really expect to learn relevant to our present from texts deriving from undeveloped societies without the glories of hedge funds or stock markets, using languages which lack the word ‘capital’? That question, of course, applies to any contemporary ethical issue, and I begin from the presupposition, which it is not the task of this paper to defend, that in Scripture we have words which, as Karl Barth put it in regard to Romans, ‘urgently and finally address the very marrow of human civilisation’, and not a heap of archaeological rubble only of interest to ancient historians.¹ In regard to no ethical issue – whether in sexuality, politics or economics - do we learn specific prescriptions which the task is simply to follow. What we learn, rather, is the direction we have to look for answers. In Rowland and Roberts' words scripture gives us ‘something like orientations, models, types, directives, principles, inspirations’, the things needed to give us a hermeneutic competence to make decisions about our present.² To say that this is especially true of the economy is deeply ironic given the profound subversion of all that Scripture has to say on the issue over the past three hundred years. The whole of Scripture bears in some way or other on our structuring of life together, for which economics is central, and this means I have had to be drastically selective. I have chosen to focus on just two texts, I Kings 18-20 and Leviticus 25, and on just two themes, idolatry and redemption

YHWH and Baal
Economy, says Adam Smith, is about life and this is the most fundamental connection between Scripture and economics, though Smith remained unaware of it. For YHWH is the God of life, the living God, the one whose will is fullness of life – precisely what is promised us by what we have come to know, over the past forty years, as ‘the Market’. Scripture as a whole is an account, a debate, about the conditions which will give us fullness of life. The means for realising such fullness is already contested within Scripture itself, but, especially in Deuteronomy and the history in 1 and 2 Kings which used to be called the Deuteronomic history, there is the record of a standoff between two cultures, two economies, and their two legitimating deities, YHWH and Baal.

In the great scene in 1 Kings 18 Elijah, whose name means ‘YHWH is God’, challenges the Baal prophets to do what they claim to do best, provide fertility – fill the supermarket shelves - and when they fail he has them slaughtered. For everyone who has done their course on ‘other religions’ and learned how bad it is to be exclusivist this is a rather shocking text. What Elijah ought to have done was set up a dialogue programme and affirmed the best in the Baal religion seeing what he, as a Yaḥwist, could learn from it. Why take this absolutist way?

As Bas Wielenga has argued, the story comes to us from a period when there are major cultural and economic tensions between Yahwism and the cult of Ba’al. Many scholars now believe that Israel did not come into being through conquest, but rather through the coming together of a mixture of freed slaves, migrants from the outskirts of Mesopotamian kingdoms (‘A wandering Aramean was my father’), the Moses group coming up from Egypt, bringing with them worship of YHWH, and nomadic groups called apiru. Much later on this story was written as an imperial narrative: we came, we saw, we conquered. We learn something rather different from Judges 1.21 and 27-35 which lists all the cities and regions Israel could not conquer. Moreover, the coming together of Israel was part of a larger wave of migration which included Ammonites, Moabites and Edomites. In other words, we are dealing with one of those large movements of peoples which mark the whole of human history up to the present. The group called Israel, whose common ideology was the YHWH cult, survived for a long time as a federation of clans without permanent leaders. The people celebrated in Judges emerged to give leadership in times of crisis but then went back to their ordinary jobs. This period was literally formative for Yahwism. YHWH was not perceived as a heavenly monarch, legitimating monarchy and all that goes with it, (spelled out in bitter detail in1 Samuel 8), but as the one who delivered Israel from slavery and who inspired women and men to fight for and maintain their freedom. Correspondingly, the view of the human is egalitarian, opposed to hierarchy and privilege. This God did not need temples or an elaborate cultus. YHWH was known rather in the instruction or codes according to which people lived, apparently in a broadly egalitarian way.

This situation collapsed due to technological change: Israel had bronze age technology but it found itself up against iron age technology and the old tribal leadership pattern was simply inadequate to cope with the challenge. Hence the cry: Give us a King like all the nations! Although David remained a king ‘amongst his brethren’ (1 Samuel 16.13 ) his son adopted the style, the economics and politics, of surrounding middle eastern kings. In both north and south, but more strongly in the north, a cultural divide opened up between the old tribal culture, rooted in the countryside, hostile to monarchy, based on an independent peasantry, and the urbanised elite influenced by the Ba’al religion to the north. The hostility to the Ba’al cult should not be read either as chauvinism or as religious intolerance. What is condemned in the cult is, as Ton Veerkamp argues, the ruling pattern of relationships. ‘According to the traditions of Ba’al, a name which means ‘owner’, the king has absolute powers; according to the traditions of YHWH, on the other hand, the king was under the ancient law of the tribes. This is the background to the Elijah story. Ahab cuts a rather pathetic figure. He had a palace in Samaria, where the Ba’al cult was dominant, and a palace in Jezeel, which was Yahwist. He tried to satisfy both constituencies but ran into problems with the obstinacy of the old Yahwist peasantry, represented by Naboth. Under Canaanite law land could be freely bought and sold. It was a commodity. According to the old Yahwist principles however, each family had a share, their nachalah, which guaranteed each family both a living and freedom. It represented every family’s stake in the means of production. Ahab wanted Naboth’s land to extend his palace garden and made him an offer he couldn’t refuse. Unfortunately the obstinate old curmudgeon did
refuse. Why? Because he likes this particular fig tree? No: ‘Naboth does not stand for the past of an outdated idea of the law of YHWH but for the future of Israel, in which class relationships would not indeed be done away with (aufgehoben), but in which arbitrary property acquisition would be strictly limited by tight legislation’ (einschränkende Massnahmen). The threat to Ahab is deadly: he turns his face to the wall, which is what one does when one prepares to die (2 Kings 20.2) and Jezebel, Ahab’s wife, the leading protagonist of the Ba’al cult, understands this. She has Naboth murdered and presents the land to her husband. Her act reveals not only a different understanding of God, but also, and because of that, of the human. Little people are not there to get in the way. If they do, they must be removed. No laws stand in the way. At this point Elijah turns up: have you killed and taken possession? ‘The king who sought to be a big landowner at the cost of freedom and life of people meets the prophet of YHWH, who claims to be the Sovereign of the land which he has given to his people in order to protect its freedom against usurpation.’ The king is not above the law: he is charged with theft and murder. The Naboth story is symbolically about what Ba’alim, the gods of ownership, do: they kill and take possession. Elijah, the representative of YHWH, the God of life, has to oppose them for this reason. Killing and taking possession is the hallmark of idolatry. What we mean by the word ‘God’, says Veerkamp, is what provides the fundamental justification for rights of ownership. The question is not whether or not there is a God, for there is always a God in this sense. The question rather is who is God: the one who represents the politically and economically strong or YHWH who frees his people from the house of slavery and protects the weak.

This had already been seen by Martin Luther, who, commenting on the first commandment, said that the faith of the heart makes both God and idol. He went on: ‘A God is that to which we look for all good and in which we find refuge in every time of need…Many a person thinks he has God and everything he needs when he has money and property; in them he trusts and of them he boasts so stubbornly and securely that he cares for no one. Surely such a man also has a god – mammon by name, that is, money and possessions – on which he fixes his whole heart. It is the most common idol on earth’.

The story in Daniel 3 exemplifies this exactly. The king has a huge image of gold made before which people have to prostrate themselves. In words which recall Marx Veerkamp comments: ‘A means of exchange, a means of preserving value and a measure of value: gold is the centre of gravity for the Hellenistic economy. The king of kings makes an image out of it; he reifies the economy and makes it a cultic object, he fetishizes gold. The embodiment of politics (the king) exalts the embodiment of economics (gold) as God of the whole world – that is the process recounted here. So the story describes the unity of politics, economics and ideology in the Hellenistic period. It describes a world economic order’. But this parable applies not just to the Hellenistic world but to our own in which every continent and most cities is thick with phallic buildings erected (I use the term advisedly) to the glory of capital.

‘Competitiveness for unlimited money accumulation’, says Ulrich Duchrow, ‘is the objective and subjective structure, the ‘god’ of our market society, which determines the whole’. It is this god, this Ba’al, which is driving the rise in global temperature which could lead to the end of human life on earth; which lies behind the sweat shops, and which can crucify whole nations through debt. ‘Accordingly’, says Duchrow, ‘the core of what we must reject is the absolute value attributed to competition and the total absence of limits set on the cancerous growth of capital’. Absolute value and absence of limits are traditional attributes of deity. Idolatry is not about harmless ‘green eyed yellow idols to the north of Kathmandu’, or anywhere else, but about making absolute that which is not God. The idol of Nebuchadnezzar is, as Veerkamp describes it, a ‘really existing god’, with real power, who has to be celebrated in liturgies which internalise its lordship and to defy which means you have to be cast into the fire, as the opponents of Pinochet and the other Latin American dictators were cast into the fire. ‘Every generation will be confronted with its own Ba’als, their own strange gods, who grab power over them and seek to devour them.’ Our own Ba’al is the doctrine of necessary economic growth. Of course all of us here are beneficiaries of the growth which has taken place since 1750. Of course growth is necessary to raise the living standards of billions of the world’s people. But if growth is at the expense of
generations yet unborn then it is idolatrous, and this is the charge. The living God is known in the giving of life: death is the hallmark of idolatry. We have a global economy which kills and takes possession. In this context, theology is as Veerkamp puts it, about lie detection. The fact that the Name of God is unspeakable and the voice of God cannot be tied down (Gestaltlos) is about resistance to colonisation by any Ba’al.  

At the same time, all theology is anthropology: different views of what it means to be human, of human community and society, are bound up with our understanding of what is absolute. Possessive individualism, to use Macpherson’s phrase, is the hallmark of our idolatry and it is challenged, as we shall see later, by a very different view of human life and community.

The question of justice, then, is first of all a question of faith, of the God of life and the idols of death. ‘Justice’ is what serves life for all, and not just for the powerful, for the future as well as for the present, for women as well for men, for black as well as for white, for Dalits as well as for caste Hindus. As we are only too well aware the whole exercise of finance capital is based on faith – it’s called confidence in the finance pages, a word which has ‘fides’ at its heart. Never mind that the word God may not be used. ‘If we call the system as a whole into question this is the God question whether explicit or not.’ Do we trust the system? If we do the markets thrive, but if people lose faith, watch out! Then you have a run on the Bank, Northern Rock, and governments step in with billions of tax payers’ money to re-establish confidence. But the real question is, in whom do we trust? In which God? It is Elijah’s question: Whom do you serve? YHWH or Ba’al: the God of life or the god of possession. That is the question of justice. Christians are atheists in regard to the gods of the state, said Justin Martyr in the middle of the second century. In the same way we have to reject faith in the god of the market. ‘Gods only survive as long as they are worshipped. Without acceptance and legitimation power cannot exist. A denial of the untamed commodity-money mechanisms of the world market is, therefore, the most important precondition for a change of direction towards a life sustaining economy’

That has been Ulrich Duchrow’s charge to us for thirty years now, and it is high time we heeded it.

Redemption

My second text is Leviticus 25, a very long text which covers almost every aspect of classical economy – Land, labour, leisure, debt, interest and capital. Ton Veerkamp says of it: ‘The theology is here this particular economy; and the economy is here this theology of an ongoing (erfahrenen) liberation’. I shall focus on the theme of redemption, bearing in mind that this is an important economic word: we live in a world built on debt: you redeem your mortgage; you redeem loans; you redeem items you have had to pawn. An economy built on debt literally requires redemption.

25.1 YHWH spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai.

Leviticus begins with God calling Moses from the tent of meeting. The point about this is that it is outside the situation which had been known in the monarchy, outside the encounter with the golden calf, i.e the economic relations of Canaan. It brackets out this experience of economic alienation and class society. It looks to renewal, to a different form of economy. But now, in 25.1, and three other times in the book, God speaks as during the exodus from Sinai and gives instruction, torah. ‘Torah’ is a vision of what it is which makes life possible and fruitful. ‘Without Torah any society goes to ruin…the ruin of the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah was the product of a deep seated anomic, living without Torah (Torahlosigkeit)’. We overlook this insight at our peril, as Jared Diamond’s book Collapse warns us. Diamond consider a number of societies, both ancient and modern, where social and ecological rules were wilfully overlooked. The ancient societies are now under the sand. He warns us that this will be true of Montana and London in the near future if we do not look out. Torah is not religious mumbo jumbo, à la Polly Toynbee, but fundamental reflection on justice and survival, on what makes human flourishing possible. This is not empty theological idealism: all over the world economists are waking up to the fact that local, national and global economies can be and have to be structured very
differently to the present model. In the twentieth century we had two paradigm shifts: from classical liberalism to Keynsianism and then from Keynsianism to neo liberalism. In case you hadn’t noticed oil is now 130 dollars a barrel. This is not just about the demands China and India are making on oil reserves but also about Peak Oil. That, and the facts of climate change, means the end of the world as we know it, and the end of the present wretched economic paradigm. Herman Daly’s work on steady state economies can be regarded, in my view, as an attempt to think about economics in the perspective of Torah: it is a response to Leviticus 25.1

You shall count off seven weeks’ of years, seven times seven years, so that the period of seven weeks of years gives forty-nine years. Then you shall have the trumpet sounded loud; on the tenth day of the seventh month—on the day of atonement—you shall have the trumpet sounded throughout all your land. And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family. That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you: you shall not sow, or reap the aftergrowth, or harvest the unpruned vines. For it is a jubilee; it shall be holy to you: you shall eat only what the field itself produces.

In this year of jubilee you shall return, every one of you, to your property

The Jubilee proposals have acquired a high profile in recent years as a result of the drop the debt campaign. In antiquity debt regularly led to slavery. According to the programme of Deuteronomy, both debt and slavery were to be abolished every seven years. Leviticus proposes every fiftieth year. Myers argues that the Jubilee ‘was not offered as an unattainable ideal but as a practical hedge against the inevitability of the stratification of wealth and power within human societies. The social model for free tribal Israel was periodically to deconstruct debt, land alienation and bond servitude’. Recently Philippe Guillaume has denied this reading and argued that the Jubilee year is actually a mechanism to allow farmers to take out short term loans to finance their agricultural operations — a sort of early Grameen bank. It sees that loans do not exceed the productive capacity of the land. He comments, ‘By regulating the amount of credit to the actual abilities of borrowers to honour their debts, the Jubilee as the [Priestly writer] conceived it provides a realistic method which preserves the interests of all parties. Instead of supporting the cancellation of the debt of Third World countries by their First World creditors, the Jubilee breaks the cycle of dependence’. In some ways this is an attractive proposition, but the denial that debt slavery was the problem runs counter not only to the text but to the widespread recognition of such problems in the Ancient world where we likewise find widespread prohibition of interest. It may be that credit was necessary even in a subsistence economy and if it was, indebtedness arises not simply by taking out a bigger loan than one can guarantee but through a whole array of problems from crop failure to cult to war which can make indebtedness inevitable even in the best of years. The widespread existence of debt slavery in the ancient world seems to me to call Guillaume’s theory into question.

The term ‘jubilee’ derives from the blowing of the jobel, the ram’s horn which was blown at the approach to Mt. Sinai and the downfall of Jericho. ‘Jericho and its lords, the Baa’al-jericho, are the symbolic indications of that situation which must be overthrown if freedom is to be realised’. The jubilee is about the ‘conservatism of revolution’ the return to the original situation, the dismantling of class and the return to equality. This ‘permanent revolution’ never happened, as we can see from Ezekiel 48, but the call to it is based on a perception of what is worthy and what is unworthy of the human which is the bottom line of every economic order. The meaning of jubilee is, then, bigger than debt as such. Beyond that it says that there are no ‘iron laws of the market’, no economics working like fate, no submission to Margaret Thatcher’s personal idol, TINA. Debts can be remitted and whole populations can be liberated if that is what is politically willed

The jubilee is proclaimed on the day of atonement when Israel confesses its sins. ‘This confession and acknowledgement of sin is no spiritual and moral inner opportunity of individual men, but is robustly material in the return to relations of freedom in the economy of the land and the return to the family unit, which is
being renewed’. We are beginning to get accustomed to confession of sin in relation to slavery, to the genocide of indigenous populations and to Christian treatment of the Jews. Slavery, of course, was part of a particular economy. We are still far from facing up to the relations of oppression implicit in most economies, and in particular our own. Without this facing up, addressing our shadow, which is the purpose of the day of atonement, we cannot begin on more just economic relationships. The jubilee proposals envisage, then, a fundamental heart searching in regard to economics, asking where the vehicle we are travelling in is going, whether it has got any brakes, and what is the purpose of the journey. This ought to be the first module in any degree in economics. As it is, we have the triviality of business ethics, which misses the point entirely.

When you make a sale to your neighbour or buy from your neighbour, you shall not exploit one another. When you buy from your neighbour, you shall pay only for the number of years since the jubilee; the seller shall charge you only for the remaining crop-years. If the years are more, you shall increase the price, and if the years are fewer, you shall diminish the price; for it is a certain number of harvests that are being sold to you. You shall not exploit one another, but you shall fear your God; for I am the LORD your God.

We are told here not to exploit. The verb *janah*, exploit, is, as Veerkamp points out, a word found in the later prophets, once in Second Isaiah, four times in Jeremiah, seven times in Ezekiel, once in Zephaniah, and in the Torah in Ex 22.20, Dt 23.17 and Lev 19.33, in all 18 times. It means, ‘to use force’ as the Egyptians had done. The passage looks to the protection of the socially and economically weak. The command to remember what happened in Egypt is crucial to Israel’s identity: to remember the reality of harsh oppression, and therefore both to be in solidarity with slaves, but also to seek to eliminate oppression. The very name YHWH is ‘the expression of an order in which there neither is nor can be exploitation’.

That order has also to be an economic order. It is of course partly about the minimum wage and opposing sweat shops but much more fundamentally it is about building a society where it is, as someone once said, from each according to their ability to each according to their need. The point of remembering, whether at Passover or in the eucharist is of course to shape a community but in so doing to bear witness to the call for liberation in the whole of society, in Second Isaiah’s words, taken up by Jesus, to be a light to the nations.

Guillaume argues very plausibly that this could not make sense agriculturally but was in fact a year when labour was pooled to clear waste land and so to increase the amount of land available for farming. This is a pragmatic reading and, as Veerkamp notes, the provisions of this text will hardly convince pragmatic people either then or now. But the sense of the text is rather a challenge to the logic of production as something self standing, as serving its own purposes. It is an expression of the ‘principle of hope’ and warns that if human beings think that they can manage land and resources on arbitrary principles which they themselves devise they will end up in the house of slavery. The point of the sabbath year is to cut through the self evident logic of production. Never has this text been more relevant than it is today. The tremendous growth in population, in technological capacity and in food resources has all ridden on the back of cheap energy. Very early on it was a clergyman, Thomas Malthus, who raised the question of finitude. The warning that for everyone to live at the level of today’s North Americans we need three planets is an updated version of Malthus’ gloomy predictions. His warning was not heeded: instead people behaved, and continue to behave, as if cheap energy were infinite: there is no end to the party. No, say the authors of Leviticus, that is not the case. You cannot take resources for granted. For two centuries, been sawing off the branch on which it sits in destroying the ecological basis of productivity. The logic of production is not self evident. The need to respect our ecological basis is what is given us in the text.
The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants.

Veerkamp calls this perhaps the most important verse in Scripture. The denial of absolute possession of the land, on the ground that ‘the land is mine’, means that there are no absolute property rights, and that therefore no class structure is other than provisional. ‘In every society there is a God, that is, that which finally undergirds everything, the ground order, and at the same time the limiting instance of the right to property’. The term nachalah, which is crucial to the Naboth story, is used in relation to the share of land of the family (Mic 2.2, Ruth 4.5) of the clan (1 Kings 21 3–4, Lev 25.10) of the tribe (Josh 13.8) and of the whole people of Israel (Dty 32 8–9). It understands the land as gift and trust. Land, for the biblical writers, is not a form of private property with its exclusive character and absolute right of use and abuse. Israel did not have this right, at least according to the authors of Leviticus. Wielenga comments: ‘The land is the aim of YHWH’s ways with Israel. It is and remains his gift, and the fruits of its soil are his blessing. It is meant to be the basis of a new society, of fellowship in freedom and equality. Such a gift is necessarily demanding. The fellowship in freedom is threatened by the development of inequality and class contradictions in society. When landlordism and slavery take hold of society freedom gets lost. The gift of freedom—in—the land requires therefore obedience to YHWH’s Torah which instructs the people to restrict the strong and strengthen the weak through proper institutions and a practice of solidarity.’ Such institutions were the remission of debt provisions and the limitation of domestic service. The remission codes are based on faith in YHWH, the God who frees from Egypt. That YHWH is God means that the gods of possession are not absolute. This continues to apply to land, as Hernando de Soto’s The Mystery of Capital makes clear, but it goes beyond land. Where Leviticus speaks of land we must understand the basic means of production. ‘The land is mine’ means that the fundamental means of production cannot be alienated. In other words, there will never be either a satisfactory democracy or a satisfactory economy until we re-introduce Clause 4. Of course, ‘the land is mine’ does not stop at common ownership of the means of production. It implies, more fundamentally, an attitude of respect and gratitude, precisely what is intended by the command in Gen 2.15 to serve and keep the earth. But it also implies common ownership of the means of production.

Throughout the land that you hold, you shall provide for the redemption of the land.

The idea of redemption here refers to the go’el relationship, according to which it is the task of a kinsman to restore a family’s fortunes, as we see in Ruth. In what Veerkamp calls the Ge’ulah ordering of society it is the task of every member of society to act as if each were his next of kin. This was essential if, due to debt, people had become oppressed. The text links redemption to land, a point important for Christians in countering a millennium at least of spiritualising accounts and making clear how redemption applies in the real world. It means two things: (1) Freedom from debt, where debt means loss of any stake in the means of production and (2) Freedom for a share in the productive process. In a situation where the means of production (‘land’) are cornered, owned by the few, used for the profit of the few, then ‘the land’ is unredeemed, not part of the common treasury which is there for the maintenance of life for all people. To corner it, to have it unredeemed, is both to subject life to capital, and therefore a form of idolatry, but also to invite complete social collapse as it makes the mistake of all ‘big’ owners in failing to understand the mutual indebtedness of the whole of society, without which we simply collapse. No society built on expropriation is ultimately sustainable.

If anyone of your kin falls into difficulty and sells a piece of property, then the next-of-kin shall come and redeem what the relative has sold. If the person has no one to redeem it, but then prospers and finds sufficient means to do so, the years since its sale shall be computed and the difference shall be refunded to the person to whom it was sold, and the property shall be returned. But if there are not sufficient means to
recover it, what was sold shall remain with the purchaser until the year of jubilee; in the jubilee it shall be released, and the property shall be returned.

The Hebrew verb muk, used four times in this chapter, and translated ‘falls into difficulty’, has the same meaning as the word ‘dalit’, ‘pushed right down’, crushed, the lowest of the low. The law of redemption is a way of trying to see that a permanent underclass is not created. That attempt is at the heart of any humane economy: it’s about family tax credits, equality of opportunity in health and education. A progressive tax system is part of the fulfilment of this particular piece of legislation.

If any of your kin fall into difficulty and become dependent on you, you shall support them; they shall live with you as though resident aliens.

Do not take interest in advance or otherwise make a profit from them, but fear your God; let them live with you. You shall not lend them your money at interest taken in advance, or provide them food at a profit. I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to give you the land of Canaan, to be your God.

Here we have the famous prohibition of usury, referred to by the word neschek, bite. Usury in Leviticus, Veerkamp argues, means something different to interest in a capitalist society. ‘Interest is individual tribute, and, like every form of tribute, legalised robbery. This is essential. A relatively constant population, a scarcely extendable capital (agricultural land), and a more or less non existent technical progress made real growth more or less impossible. In this situation to take interest is not to take a portion of profit or economic growth but expropriation of producers as occupiers of the land (they became landless) or as workers (they became slaves). The prohibition of usury in Antiquity was therefore economically necessary and ethically fundamental because of the many small producers through usury threatened the whole of social and economic life.

Later on in the chapter, in verses 47-55, there are complex regulations about redemption. In these the power of property ownership is restricted and limited. In our day what we can take from this is the need of economic legislation to ‘tame’ capital. A deregulated market, comments Veerkamp, cannot be accepted on two grounds: ‘first, dependent on the society, there is no free means of supply; second the command not to oppress makes a self regulation of prices through the laws of the market impossible’. But of course the deregulated market is exactly what is regarded as essential, the principle article of faith of our contemporary Ba’alism. In some respects it has been astonishingly successful, but at a colossal cost which, depending on the final outcome of global warming, may be far beyond all the gulags put together.

You shall make for yourselves no idols and erect no carved images or pillars, and you shall not place figured stones in your land, to worship at them; for I am the LORD your God. You shall keep my sabbaths and reverence my sanctuary: I am the LORD.

The passage ends with a warning about idolatry spelling out, as Veerkamp argues, that the economic order is an expression of the first and second commandments. The rejection of other gods is ‘not an expression of religious intolerance but of the practical irreconcilability of conditions in a society that tries to follow the orders of the sabbath and ge’ulah (redemption) in the context of the property accumulation typical of the ancient Near East’. The same irreconcilability exists today between the ruling discourse and the discourse of the marginalised, between the ruling discourse, which wants constant growth, and the discourse which understands justice as inter generational. Those who come out of Egypt do not necessarily enter the promised land but they do so for the sake of ‘generations yet to come’.

Jesus re-frames the economic teaching of the Hebrew bible, alluding to the choice between ‘two ways’ in Deuteronomy, in terms of the choice between God and Mammon. This means a choice ‘between a society based on never-ending profit making and a society based on equal sharing so that nobody needs to be anxious about his life. ‘No one can serve two masters...You cannot serve God and Mammon’ ( Mt 6.24). Like the
authors of Deuteronomy and of Leviticus he anticipates an economy of sharing: his whole way of life is opposed to the laws of the market. That is the meaning of the story of the sharing of bread and fishes in Mk 6. Sharing means freedom based on equality. This is lived out in the early community where Luke tells us there ‘was not a needy person among them’ (Acts 4.32), thus fulfilling Dt 15. Duchrow comments beautifully: ‘In this way Jesus came alive among them, not by virtue of their using their property as their own, to maximize personal profit and accumulate property, but by the community living together in such a way that there was no hardship among them. Jesus’ resurrection means – economically speaking – life in community without need.\[33\] Something like this alternative is what justice means in the sphere of capital, an alternative imagination which calls into being an alternative society. Just so did Paul imagine ecclesia as the seed bed of a new humanity, a society where the justice of Torah was taken seriously and worked out. For him it was a question of a world made new through reconciled relationships. What this means, of course, is that to let justice roll down as waters we need to take ecclesia seriously, and to let the understanding of community, and of what is absolute, learned there, infect our economic, and indeed all our other understanding.

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1. K. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* Oxford: Oxford University Press 1933 p.9
6. Veerkamp, *Vernichtung* p.112
7. Wielenga *Long Road* p. 135
8. Veerkamp *Autonomie* p 101
9. M. Luther *The Large Catechism* Minneapolis: Augsburg 1967 p.11
10. Veerkamp *Autonomie* p.243
12. Veerkamp *Autonomie* p.245
13. Veerkamp, *Vernichtung* p 51
14. Veerkamp *Autonomie* p.373/4
15. Veerkamp *Autonomie* p. 281ff
16. Duchrow *Alternatives* p. 235
17. Veerkamp *Autonomie* p.96
18. Veerkamp, *Autonomie* p. 84
21. P. Guillaume, *Land and Calendar: The Priesterschrift from Genesis to Joshua*, Unpub ms p.135
22. Veerkamp *Autonomie* p 93,94
23. Veerkamp, *Autonomie* p. 94
24. Veerkamp *Autonomie* p.97
25. Veerkamp *Autonomie* p. 98
26. Veerkamp *Autonomie* p. 98
27. Veerkamp *Autonomie* p. 101
28. Wielenga, op. cit p. 125
29. Veerkamp *Autonomie* p. 30
30. Veerkamp *Autonomie* p.96
31. Veerkamp *Autonomie* p.113
32. Wielenga, *Perspectives* p.38