

Dialogue I

Applying an Interpretive Framework for Insights on Asset Management: A Response to “Doing Business with the Hebrew Bible”

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Conceptual and Operational Background

A common approach for Christian educators when seeking to integrate faith and learning is to seek “biblical solutions” to problems facing and created by corporations. Lynn and Wallace (2001) offer a framework for reversing this sequence. They advocate ten hermeneutic principles conveniently grouped into three sequential steps.

Beginnings—

The Exegetical Process

Broadening the Focus—

Theological Reflection

Applying the Text—

Hermeneutic Implications

This paper explores the scriptural concept of land tenancy as described in Leviticus 25.

By applying the tri-fold model of Lynn and Wallace, we are able to gain insights and raise questions. Both are useful in accomplishing the educational process.

It has been our experience that students have a significant interest in wealth accumulation, especially in “real property.” This may be because owning a home is seen as an important step toward full adulthood. Or, it may be that published lists of the “most wealthy persons” perk their (or their parents’) interest in land tenancy. But whatever the reason, we have found real estate transactions make more intuitive the key concept of “investment” with dimensions of saving, risk, time value of money, and appreciation, and that asset use, division, and ownership are pedagogically powerful constructs.

Step One: Beginnings—The Exegetical Process

Land was an integral part of Israel's faith—it was central to Yahweh's promise to Abraham. The promised land was the explicit objective of the exodus from Egypt and was the focus of the major historical traditions of Israel extending from Joshua to David (Wright, 1988, p. 860). Though the land was both promised by and a gift from Yahweh, ownership of the land remained with Yahweh with the Israelites holding the land as stewards or agents. Thus, all issues regarding division, tenure, and use of the land had moral or ethical significance, and they were determined within the parameters of Yahweh's covenant relationship with Israel.

One important provision regarding the division, tenure, and use of the land tenancy was the year of Jubilee detailed in Leviticus 25. However, to understand the year of Jubilee, one needs to understand both the Sabbatical year and the creative activity model that Yahweh provided. The accounts of Genesis 1 and 2 describe six days of creative activity followed by a seventh day of rest. Yahweh not only rested on the seventh day, He blessed it and made it holy

(Genesis 2:2-3). This provides a model for human beings, Yahweh's image bearers. Not only are we to model our Creator by engaging in creative activity, we are also to model Him by resting from creative activity.

The Sabbatical year calendar applies this seven-period cycle to years, not days. Thus, the Sabbatical calendar requires that six years of working the land be followed by a year where the land is allowed to rest. The calendar for the year of Jubilee is based on the Sabbatical year calendar. After a period of seven Sabbatical years (49 years), a year of Jubilee takes place. Thus, a year of Jubilee takes place every 50 years, or once in a typical person's lifetime. Beyond rest for the land, the Sabbatical year was also a time for release of debts and/or release of pledges for debt and for the release of slaves. Tying back to the land, the release of debts in the Sabbatical year was primarily concerned with agrarian debt related to the use of land (Wright, 1988, p. 858).

The concepts of freedom and restoration are integral to the year of Jubilee. Individuals were freed from the burden of debt, and all land was returned to its family of ancestral inheritance. Regarding

the year of Jubilee provisions, Wenham (1979, p. 317) notes that "The main purpose of these laws is to prevent the utter ruin of debtors," while Hartley (1992, pp. 424-425) notes that "The primary reason that these laws have been incorporated into the legislation on the year of Jubilee is that debt was the greatest internal threat to the social foundation of the equality of all Israelites."

The freedom and restoration that takes place in the year of Jubilee is in some respects a freedom and restoration of "last resort" for persons whose family members failed in their responsibility to redeem both a) their relatives who had fallen into slavery and b) land that their relatives had lost. Here "family" has three levels: the tribe, clan, and father's house. The tribe was the primary unit of social and territorial organization in Israel. There was one tribe for each of the 12 sons of Jacob, with Joseph's sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, taking the place of Joseph. Between the tribe and the father's house came the intermediate unit of the clan. The clan was both a unit of recognizable kinship and a unit of territorial identity. The father's house was the level of family

organization with which an individual Israelite had the strongest sense of inclusion, identity, protection, and responsibility. The father's house was essentially an extended family, and it typically included between 50 and 100 people. The responsibility of redemption, detailed in the role of kinsman-redeemer, extended beyond the father's house to the clan (Wright, 1982, pp. 761-769).

Step Two: Broadening the Focus—Theological Reflection

The previous discussion of the year of Jubilee evidences the importance of inheritance of land in the governing framework that Yahweh provided for Israel. And just why did Yahweh place such great importance in an inheritance in the promised land? The answers to this question are several.

First, in an agrarian economy, such as that of Israel, land is a necessary resource for sustaining life. If a family has claim to a tract of land, that family has the ongoing, continuing potential for sustaining life. Note that a claim to a tract of land is a necessary, not a sufficient, condition for sustaining life. Raising crops from a tract of land is contingent on other factors, including effort

invested by the family and favorable weather conditions.

The return of land to the family of original inheritance during the year of Jubilee ensured that no family would be permanently estranged from the resource necessary for sustaining life. The functioning of the kinsman-redeemer provisions as Yahweh intended would minimize the number of times when the year of Jubilee provisions would be necessary. Additionally, the open harvesting provisions of the Sabbatical year and the many exhortations to care for the poor, the fatherless, and the widow were intended to sustain families temporarily without a claim to a tract land.

It seems evident, then, that Yahweh employs a perspective that today would be called “stakeholder-based.” That is, the Scripture recognizes multiple constituents with sometimes conflicting claims to scarce resources. Stated specifically,

Timeless Truth A: Yahweh desires that all people be provided with the resources

necessary for sustaining a reasonable standard of living.

Timeless Truth B: Yahweh expects that people will be wise stewards of the resources they are entrusted with.

Timeless Truth C: Even when necessary resources are provided and those resources are used wisely, factors beyond the control of individuals can result in economic calamity. In situations such as this, Yahweh desires that those with plenty provide for those in need.

The precepts of Leviticus 25 also recognize issues of loyalty and trust. In an agrarian economy where land could not be permanently bought or sold,

the extended family unit was preserved. Land, a necessary resource for sustaining

life, is not a mobile resource. Hence, members of an extended family unit remained committed to the same tract of land. But, ownership of the land and control of factors such as weather, pestilence, and disease remained with Yahweh. This served to foster and perpetuate an attitude of trust and dependence on

Yahweh. For those who wished to place their trust in material possessions, returning land to the family of original ancestry in the year of Jubilee thwarted attempts to accumulate massive land holdings. Additionally, for those who wished to place their trust in their own skills, there was the ever-present risk that factors beyond human control—factors such as weather, pestilence, and disease—could significantly diminish any harvest, reinforcing the reality that human beings are totally dependent on Yahweh. Stated specifically,

Timeless Truth D: Yahweh values the preservation of the extended family unit.

Timeless Truth E: Yahweh desires that His children look to Him, not to His creation or human wisdom and skill, as the ultimate source of fulfillment, security, and provision.

Step Three: Applying the Text—Hermeneutic Implications

The business world of the 21st century differs radically from the agrarian economy of ancient Israel. Thus, while the land tenancy laws that Yahweh provided for ancient Israel have little if any application to the

modern business world, the timeless truths that underlie those land tenancy laws remain valid and relevant. In a pedagogical context, guidelines for applying these timeless truths to the modern business world would appear as follows.

The Information and Technology Economy

With change taking place at an increasing pace, the modern economy depends more on human or intellectual capital than it does on physical capital. Thus, human or intellectual capital has a relatively short service life. This leaves the typical member of the work force in a tenuous position. An individual’s capacity to earn an income depends on the extent to which the individual possesses marketable human or intellectual capital, while skills that are marketable one day may be obsolete the next. Individuals are faced with the necessity of continually upgrading their skill sets. Failure to do so could easily leave an individual unemployed.

Income Safety Net

Though unemployment benefits generally provide for individuals who find themselves unemployed, what is needed is an improved system for keeping skill

sets current and for retraining individuals with suddenly obsolete skills. And while the extent to which this system would be supported by the public and private sectors remains to be determined, individual firms that desire to operate in consonance with biblical principles can develop ongoing continuing education programs that keep the skill sets of their employees current. Beyond the desire to operate in consonance with biblical principles, continuing education programs of this sort offer the real potential of providing an economic benefit to the firm. This may explain much of the continuing education currently in place.

Resource and Employment Mobility

Closing a plant or transferring production from one location to another can have a devastating impact on a community, as opportunities for earning income are removed from the community. At the same time, individuals in the community to which production is transferred now have expanded opportunities for earning income. To what extent are the needs and interests of employees served or exploited? And, to what extent are

provisions made to assist employees in the necessary transition? Discussion that builds on the foundation of Timeless Truths A, B, and C is likely to deepen student thinking and sharpen participants' sensitivities. And, if a higher level of involvement is sought, a structured debate with some students delivering pro and con arguments (with rebuttals) and others acting as judges has been found to be a powerful teaching device.

Disruption of Family Life

As business enterprises have expanded from local to regional to national to international in scope, the potential for the breaking of employee loyalty bonds increases. A promotion or change in positions in a local enterprise need not require a geographic relocation of the family. Such is often not the case in regional, national, or international enterprises. Indeed, in enterprises of this sort geographic relocation of the family is expected.

But, if an enterprise desires to operate in consonance with biblical principles, how can it increase family stability in employee location decisions? One answer may lie in the use of

technologies like the Internet and cellular communication to enhance preservation of the extended family unit. Students typically have clear views on whether employees should accept or turn down a transfer (and seek employment at another firm) to enhance family stability and preserve the extended family unit. For either scenario, discussion based on Timeless Truths D and E is potentially evocative.

How (Much) Do I Trust?

One could view the increased instability of the business environment as a positive change with regard to Timeless Truth E. Given the reality of the residue of the fall that remains in all of Yahweh's children, one's faith is most likely to remain vital, active, and growing in an environment where that faith is stretched, i.e., where one has no choice but to trust Yahweh. Given the realities of the modern business environment, one is aware of the folly of placing ultimate trust in the implicit promise of lifetime employment with any firm. Likewise, given the ever-increasing volatility in asset markets, one is aware of the folly of placing ultimate trust in any investment portfolio.

Conclusion

We have attempted to illustrate the pedagogical power of the Lynn and Wallace approach to understanding and using Scripture. Using timeless truths implicit in the land tenancy laws of the Pentateuch, we have sought to apply them in a culturally relevant way to the modern business world. Yet, with what degree of success?

If one is seeking specific, definitive policies and recommendations, we have made but a modest contribution. If, though, as Lynn and Wallace contend, the emergence of clear questions is often more valuable than the appearance of simple answers, then our efforts may be judged as satisfactory. But your views, as readers and teachers, are as yet unknown to us. So, we invite you to dialogue, to experiment, and to refine. Whether by e-mail, fax, or telephone, let us explore together the richness of the Word and the students God has given to us.

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