Is It Good to Be Rich?

Edited by
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Answers from the Bible and Antiquity

Edited by

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May 29, 2024

Peter Altmann
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Tightrope Walking

The Tension between Wealth and Ethics in Antiquity and the Bible

"Is it good to be rich?" One might wonder the value of putting together such an extensive anthology to answer a question that almost everyone would spontaneously answer with a resounding "yes." But thinking further, even as the "yes" is exclaimed, questions and doubts begin to stir: What does it actually mean to be rich? How is it measured? Then one might reflect further: Where does our/my wealth (or lack thereof) actually come from? How did it come about, and how do I/we deal with it?

The idea for this volume was born, somewhat ironically, in Reno, the little sister of the world's foremost gambling city of Las Vegas in the state of Nevada, where good luck and bad luck, wealth and loss are decided with the literal role of the dice. But it was above all the circumstances of the era that led us, as three biblical scholars, to pose this question. In 2008 the Lehman Brothers bank collapse initiated a financial crisis of enormous proportions. Countless people in the USA could no longer pay their mortgages. Many lost their homes and slipped from the middle class into poverty. In Europe, the situation was similar in many countries. Here, too, old banking houses collapsed. The European Union struggled to secure the state finances of entire countries. The common currency introduced in 2002 – and with it a unique unification project – was in danger of collapse. People in some countries faced far-reaching cuts in their social security systems. At the same time, numerous major banks were classified as "systemically important" and "too big to fail" – a move that was perceived as if politicians had issued them a blank check. After all, a bank that does not have to bear its own risks because it is "too big to fail" could take any risk for the sake of profit.

Today, the disputes of that time often seem like a bygone era. The struggle to contain the Covid pandemic has eclipsed much of these financial concerns. It has created new problems and made many old ones visible. But many of the consequences of the 2008 financial collapse still have an impact today, and the question thus remains as relevant as ever: Is it good to be rich?

Especially in the West, which brought on the 2008 crises, both language and much of life have come to be determined by economic approaches to reality. This reality has emerged even though voices within the economic sphere evaluate

wealth and riches divergently. Are those in the "One Percent" to be admired or chastised? Are there any laudable means to acquiring wealth? In light of the modern discussion, this volume puts a similar range of questions to a number of the sources that form the foundation of Western civilization. However, on the whole it seeks to drill deeper, evaluating the very economic and social phenomenon of riches itself: How did the ancients judge wealth?

Investigations of various ancient corpora from ancient Greek, biblical, early Jewish, and early church traditions in twenty-four different essays have led us to identify some expected and some surprising commonalities and divergences that crisscross the literature. In almost all contexts, the answer to the question of the title concludes with something of a muffled "yes, but …" Only a small number of text corpora explicitly evaluate wealth critically. Two examples are the preexilic prophetic literature and the Enoch literature of early Judaism. These minority voices illustrate the complexity of the approaches. The perspective from which the topic is viewed undoubtedly plays a central role in the evaluation of wealth. Nevertheless, the lack of one's own riches does not necessarily mean that one evaluates wealth negatively. Other factors necessarily play a role in determining one's view. In fact, the vast majority of writings and literary corpora do evaluate wealth positively, if only in their linguistic turns of phrase that reveal their cultural background and standards of evaluation.

In the contributions to this volume, wealth is not investigated, as it has been in earlier research in social history, exclusively against the background of a social obligation arising from it. Instead, the question of wealth as an economic and social phenomenon is posed: What constitutes wealth? How is it expressed and perceived? Is it (possibly in spite of all the criticism expressed) an ideal or is it instead the opposite? What is revealed in the use of language when talking about wealth? What is said about the methods of its acquisition, what about its use?

This volume combines several conversations that often remain separated. First, it is seldom the case that analyses of wealth in classical Greek texts are integrated into conversations with biblical studies on wealth. Similarly, the volume reaches beyond typical (Protestant) canonical boundaries to include reflections from Hellenistic Jewish sources such as Enochic literature, other Qumran texts, and Philo, as well as later views from the early church such as Tertullian, the *Acts of John*, and Clement of Alexandria. While the breadth of discussion could always be extended further, in this case to include viewpoints from the Ancient Near East and Roman sources, we believe that the inclusion of these interdisciplinary sources necessarily moves the conversation forward.

Second, views on wealth within scholarship are quite contextual, even within Western scholarship. The Anglo-American scholarly discussion often operates functionally distinct from the conversation taking place in Continental Europe. While language can play a role, we suggest that the generally different understanding of the larger role of the state with regard to the guarantee of economic

welfare on the Continent versus more resistance to such views of society and government are also significant in shaping the contours of each conversation.

We have not included the perspectives of the global South to this volume. This would have added many perspectives including hermeneutical challenges and entanglements from all sides, which seem to us to represent a topic of their own, worth adding and juxtaposing with this volume.

Description of the Contents

There are a number of ways that one can provide an overview for a collection of essays on a given topic such as this one. Rather than giving an abstract for each contribution, we focus our comments on the diverse methodologies selected by the various authors. In the case of every corpus, the limits of our medium (a volume of collected academic essays) require that authors make choices about the specific topics addressed and the depth to which they are treated. Some essays, such as Frank Ueberschaer's essay on the Hebrew Bible and early Second Temple wisdom tradition, analyze their corpus by categorizing the declarations according to each book in relation to the entanglement and competition of the accepted good of wisdom and the ambivalent topic of riches. A similar approach appears in Amrei Koch's contribution on the pentateuchal law corpora. She systematically addresses each directly significant text with regard to the acquisition and distribution of wealth. Lucia Cecchet focuses on the question of acquisition and accumulation and their evaluations as a danger or benefit for individuals and cities in literature from the Greek late archaic and classical period. Simone Beta offers further insight into the discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of wealth or poverty in Classical Greek literature in his contribution on Greek poetry.

Others, in view of their expansive material, chose to treat one topic (or character) in considerable depth, thus omitting other possible lines of investigation. Konrad Schmid's essay on Abraham's wealth in Gen 12–25 thus serves as an exemplary treatment for the view of wealth in the book of Genesis. Peter Altmann's investigation of Solomon's riches in Kings and Chronicles likewise focuses solely on this one key character but from a variety of angles. James Nogalski opts for a similar approach to the Minor Prophets. He traces the particular image of sitting under one's vines and fig trees to demonstrate the importance of this conception throughout this corpus. Nogalski's essay also folds in a considerable number of parallels and calls for response with regard to present-day economic realities.

The contributions on the preexilic prophets and the Psalms reach similar results and view the "rich" largely congruent with those oppressing the "poor." Matthew Coomber's analysis of the preexilic prophets focuses on the texts as

contemporaneous responses to the reconstructed historical developments of the eighth and seventh centuries BCE in Israel and Judah. Coomber sees a throughline in the texts of, e.g., Isaiah, Micah, and Amos, largely reacting against the increased concentration of land and wealth under elite control, whom the prophetic texts classify together as the "rich." He argues that the problem addressed in preexilic prophecy concerns an unjust economic *system* that makes wealth ethically problematic for basically all humans living within that system. Walter Houston's treatment of the Psalms likewise argues for a broad category of the "rich," though in this case largely as the implied oppressors of the much-more-frequently named "poor." While Houston sometimes ventures the articulation of a historical location for the criticized rich (e.g., a Hellenistic setting for Pss 9–10), his analysis parallels Coomber's in viewing the rich as a structural category about which little good is said (outside Ps 112).

Another important concern arising both in Coomber's analysis and in Zeba Crook's investigation of Q and Mark concerns the use of sociological models. Both of these contributions consider the extraction of wealth from rural communities by urban-based elites (and larger, more distant imperial centers) as key elements in the evaluations of wealth in their respective corpora.

Several essays take very innovative approaches to answering the volume's question. Markus Öhler imagines how several fictive characters from divergent socio-economic, gender, and other backgrounds in antiquity might have understood the Pastoral Letters' economic instructions. Thomas Blanton instead devotes his attention to understanding Paul's own likely economic status as a craftsman and traveling missionary, thus providing essential information for interpretation of his letters. David Down's approach to reading the Catholic letters as a collection of letters from pillar apostles mentioned in Galatians also promises a fresh look that results in recognizing the unifying element in the call to care for the poor.

To evaluate the varied corpus of the Dead Sea Scrolls, Giancarlo Angulo and Matthew Goff draw on Pierre Bourdieu's category of "social capital" as a way to explain the broadened conception of wealth in these documents. Their investigation marks a common turn in the essays addressing the literature of early Judaism and the New Testament. As a whole, a number of these writings grapple in more depth with the nature of "true wealth," which may have little connection with material riches. While their answers deviate, Martina Böhm's analysis of Philo's oeuvre devotes considerable space to this issue of definition.

The questions about the evaluation and definition of wealth also arise in the Gospel of Matthew, Luke-Acts, and the Acts of John. They reflect criteria for appropriate handling of wealth based on the social composition of their addressees and the challenges of their times against the background of faith convictions. Nadine Ueberschaer traces Matthew's view through the editorial revision and placement of the narrative of the rich young man in comparison to the Gospels

of Mark and Luke as well as the Matthean parable tradition. Christfried Böttrich examines the extensive material in Luke-Acts and shows that Luke intends a middle way to overcome poverty. Thomas Tops investigates the connection between the virtue of piety and wealth in the conversion of rich citizens to Christianity in the Acts of John. In his contribution to the Apocalypse of John, Michael Sommer shows that the concrete threat of existential poverty to (some of) the addressees is always in view in the book and how wealth receives positive connotations in relation to the cult and as eschatological promise. All of these contributions thus take up a question that arises from the Jesus tradition and that is traced in this volume into the early church, which is a methodology also on display in Jörg Ulrich's contribution on Clement of Alexandria.

There is no doubt that some corpora address wealth only in more oblique manners, which therefore press interpreters to consider the question from different perspectives. Mirjam Bokhorst, for example, focuses on signs of luxury such as expensive clothing in the Enochic literature, which allows her to see the economic questions at play in these texts' polemics. Likewise, David Wilhite chooses clothing and adornment as the starting point for his analyses of Tertullian's critique of wealth. He investigates the kind of clothing Tertullian considers appropriate for the believer's embodied-soul. Deirdre Fulton pays close attention to the offerings made to the Jerusalem temple and to the effort of rebuilding of the city in Ezra-Nehemiah for evaluative signs of wealth acquisition and dispersal. She builds her evaluation of this book's answer on the financial implications of the texts' treatments of divorce and the rejection of (perceived) foreign proximity to sacred spaces. A third example of this type of methodology appears in Veronika Bachmann's treatment of the narratives of Daniel, Esther, and Tobit. Riches play important yet secondary roles in Daniel and Esther. Thus, for some texts Bachmann pays attention to the narrative fates of various characters that exhibit diverse approaches to using the wealth under their control and to the gaps in explicit judgment of the ways characters come to riches. The discussion of Tobit, on the other hand, proceeds more directly, building on the overt thematization of tithing, sharing wealth, and undeserved poverty.

Conclusions, Contributions to the Field, and Directions for Further Research

If there is a through line that emerges from the volume, one might argue that it concerns the nature of the relationship between individuals and their communities. Irrespective of the geographic or cultural context, the ancient texts esteem the use of wealth for the larger community while they broadly condemn, or at least chastise, preoccupation with individual enjoyment of the benefits of riches.

Naturally, the views presented in this volume do not tell the complete story. As we noted above, the contributions represent a diversity of contexts *within* Western scholarship, which represents an expansion of the scholarly conversation, but also with considerable limitations. Undoubtedly, Majority World scholars can offer much-needed and welcome interpretations of the texts under investigation here.

Second, the conversation of these topics neither began with the Greeks and Israelites, nor did it end with the early church writers. One can imagine important early perspectives flowing in from Mesopotamia and Egypt, while rabbinical Jewish and a number of Greco-Roman philosophical views would also merit attention.

Third, even though the majority of the essays address biblical texts, omissions still take place, both in terms of textual corpora and hermeneutical approaches.

One aspect the contributions make clear is that the apparently simple question "Is it good to be rich?" is more difficult that one might initially expect. The texts examined in this volume provide insight into the struggle of reflecting on and weighing the benefits and risks of wealth. The reason for this is, on the one hand, the confrontation with the reality of poverty and its consequences. Such interactions reveal wealth's contingent nature and the injustice associated with the participation in wealth or at times even in the necessities of life. On the other hand, the texts from different times and cultures show that adequate handling of wealth requires, above all, an appropriate inner attitude of those who have financial means at their disposal. As a result, these texts from antiquity unfold their modern significance and, in view of new challenges, challenge their modern recipients to think about the just and sustainable use of resources in both the present and the future.

The Wealth of Abraham

Shifting Perspectives on Being Rich in Genesis 12–25

Konrad Schmid

A. The Prosperity Goal of the Pentateuch

When thinking about wealth in the Hebrew Bible with a specific focus on the Pentateuch and then in particular the Abraham cycle (Genesis 12–25),[1] one might start with an initial, quite striking observation: The Pentateuch formulates only relatively modest goals regarding the prosperity that Israel is to expect once it enters into its land. A well-known example can be found in Deut 26:15:[2]

השקיפה ממעון קדשך מן־השמים
וברך את־עמך את־ישׂראל ואת האדמה אשׂר נתתה לנו
כאשׂר נשׁבעת לאבתינו ארץ זבת חלב ודבשׁ׃

Look down from your holy habitation, from heaven,
and bless your people Israel and the ground that you have given us,
as you swore to our ancestors – a land flowing with milk and honey. (Deut 26:15)

The land is described as "flowing with milk and honey," but no individual or communal wealth is envisioned in this perspective. "Flowing with milk and honey" (זבת חלב ודבשׁ) is a metaphor for abundance and a paradise-like life – according to 2 En 8:5 and Sura 47:17 of the Quran, the four rivers in Paradise carry honey, milk, oil and wine –, but the imagery is more bucolic than really concerned with material prosperity. The topos is attested quite well in Ugarit and also in ancient Greece (KTU 1.6.III 12–13; Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 116–120; Horace, *Epodes* 16,47; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1,111–12; Vergil, *Bucolica* 4,21.30). Song of Songs 4:11 and 5:1 associate "milk and honey" with love, but not with prosperity.[3]

Deuteronomy 26:19 identifies Israel's goal in history not as wealth, but as fame and honor:

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[1] See Phillips, "The Attitude of Torah to Wealth," 148–63; see also Vrolijk, *Jacob's Wealth*.

[2] See Otto, *Deuteronomium 12–34*, 1900–1.

[3] See Knipping, "Die Wortkombination," 55–71; Dershowitz, "Land," 172–76; Sals, "Milch und Honig."

ולתתך עליון על כל־הגוים
אשר עשׂה לתהלה ולשם ולתפארת ולהיתך עם־קדשׁ ליהוה אלהיך
כאשׁר דבר׃

… to set you high above all nations
that he has made, as praise and as name and as honor; and for you to be a people holy to YHWH your God,
as he said. (Deut 26:19)

And if Israel achieves wealth, then it should be aware that this is not the result of its own strength and power:

ואמרת בלבבך כחי ועצם ידי עשׂה לי את־החיל הזה׃
וזכרת את־יהוה אלהיך כי הוא הנתן לך כח לעשׂות חיל למען הקים את־בריתו אשׁר־נשׁבע לאבתיך
כיום הזה׃

And do not say in your heart, "My power and the might of my hand have got me this wealth (חיל)."[4]
And remember YHWH your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth (חיל), in order to establish his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today. (Deut 8:17–18)

Material wealth thus is seen as a possible blessing, as a gift, but not as a goal in the Pentateuch, particularly at its end in the book of Deuteronomy.

If looking outside the Pentateuch,[5] the picture does not change significantly: In Ps 1, for instance, the imagery of the just man who is blessed because he studies and follows the Torah of God,[6] is painted in comparably modest ways:

אשׁרי־האישׁ אשׁר לא הלך בעצת רשׁעים
ובדרך חטאים לא עמד
ובמושׁב לצים לא ישׁב׃
כי אם בתורת יהוה חפצו
ובתורתו יהגה יומם ולילה׃

Happy is the man who does not follow the advice of the wicked,
or takes the path that sinners tread,
or sits in the seat of scoffers;
but his delight is in the Torah of YHWH,
and on his Torah he murmurs day and night. (Ps 1:1–2)

The person described here does not live in abundance and leisure, but he is an eager student of God's Torah and this is what characterizes his life day and night. In the following verse, Ps 1 becomes a little bit more explicit:

[4] For חיל as "wealth" see *HALOT*, 311.

[5] See e.g. Kuschke, "Arm und reich," 31–57; Strauß, "'Armut' und 'Reichtum,'" 179–93; Whybray, *Wealth and Poverty*.

[6] See Weber, "Tora YHWHs."

והיה כעץ שׁתול על־פלגי מים
אשׁר פריו יתן בעתו ועלהו לא־יבול
וכל אשׁר־יעשׂה יצליח׃

He is like a tree planted by streams of water,
which yields its fruit in its season, and its leaves do not wither.
In all that he does, he prospers. (Ps 1:3)

The "happy" person is likened to a tree which does not bear an abundance of fruits, but which yields its fruits in its season. Apparently, there is a certain strand in the Hebrew Bible that propagates wealth in idealized, not in material dimensions.

If we return to the Pentateuch, material richness is thematized in a very conspicuous way in the affair of the golden calf in Exod 32, but obviously with negative connotations: wealth is dangerous and can, or even will, lead to idolatry.

But where does the jewelry of the Israelites that ends up in the production of the golden calf actually come from? The topic of the golden calf is tacitly introduced in Exod 3:21–22 (see also Exod 11:2; 12:35):

ונתתי את־חן העם־הזה בעיני מצרים והיה כי תלכון לא תלכו ריקם׃
ושׁאלה אשׁה משׁכנתה ומגרת ביתה כלי־כסף וכלי זהב ושׂמלת
ושׂמתם על־בניכם ועל־בנתיכם ונצלתם את־מצרים׃

And I will bring this people into favor in the eyes of the Egyptians. And when you go, you will not go empty-handed (Deut 15:12–13).[7]
And each woman shall ask her neighbor and those living in her [i. e., the neighbor's] house for items of silver and of gold, and clothing,
and you shall put them on your sons and on your daughters; and so you shall plunder Egypt. (Exod 3:21–22)

God promises that Israel will not leave Egypt empty-handed, which is in concord with the law of the manumission of slaves in Deut 15:12–13 that commands not to let a slave go free with empty hands:

כי־ימכר לך אחיך העברי או העבריה ועבדך שׁשׁ שׁנים
ובשׁנה השׁביעת תשׁלחנו חפשׁי מעמך׃
וכי־תשׁלחנו חפשׁי מעמך לא תשׁלחנו ריקם׃

If your brother, a Hebrew man or a Hebrew woman, sells himself to you and works for you six years,
in the seventh year you shall set him free from you.
And when you send him out from you as a free person, you shall not send him out empty-handed. (Deut 15:12–13)[8]

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[7] See Schmid, *Genesis and the Moses Story*, 232 (with further bibliography).

[8] For more detail see Schmid, "Schrift als Text," 47–63. Deut 15:12–13 is about Hebrew slaveholders and Hebrew slaves, whereas the Exodus story is dealing with the Egyptians enslaving the Israelites. Nevertheless, the resonance between Deut 15:12–13 and the exodus story are clearly discernible.

The rationale behind this regulation is, of course, that the economic equipment of a slave prevents him or her from falling back into debt slavery immediately after release.

In the Exodus story, the release of Israel from Egyptian imperial power is also depicted as freeing Israel from slavery. In 1961, the French author George Auzou published a book about the Exodus story and titled it very fittingly as: "De la servitude au service,"[9] thus describing the basic move in the story that recounts the journey from Israel's servitude in Egypt to Israel's service, or if one wishes, servitude to God at Mount Sinai. But, of course, Israel is not meant to remain in the desert of Sinai; it will proceed to its land that will (or more precisely: should) guarantee its further existence in freedom, but also in terms of economic subsistence.

B. Abraham's Wealth According to Gen 13:2 and Gen 12:10–20

The Pentateuch, thus, offers a broad range of perspectives on the topic of wealth which, however, is often seen as ambiguous and never as a goal unto itself, and this is also true for the Abraham cycle in Gen 12–25. At its beginning, in Gen 13, Abraham is depicted as a wealthy sheikh:[10]

ואברם כבד מאד במקנה בכסף ובזהב׃

And Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold. (Gen 13:2)

Within the narrative context of the Abraham cycle in its present shape (Gen 12–25), the reason for Abraham's wealth is his sojourn in Egypt: When Sarai was taken to Egypt's royal court, Abraham was treated well by Pharaoh and got sheep, oxen, donkeys, slaves, and camels (Gen 12:16).

ולאברם היטיב בעבורה ויהי־לו צאן־ובקר וחמרים ועבדים ושפחת ואתנת וגמלים׃

And he [i. e., Pharaoh] dealt well with Abram because of her [i. e., Sarai], and he had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male and female slaves, female donkeys, and camels.

It is generally recognized, however, that Gen 12:10–20 is an addition to its context in Gen 12–13.[11] Abraham is depicted as a forerunner to Moses and already undertakes a first exodus from Egypt to Canaan. Pharaoh is afflicted with great strikes

[9] Auzou, *De la Servitude au Service*.

[10] See also Stansell, "Wealth: How Abraham Became Rich," 92–110.

[11] See e. g. Blum, *Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte*, 309; Schmid, *Genesis and the Moses Story*, 57–58.

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