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The Bible, the Economy, and the Poor

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Introduction

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On Friday, November 22, 2013, a small group of biblical scholars, including some of the contributors to this volume, gathered in Baltimore, Maryland with a few local church leaders and community labor organizers to explore the role of the Bible in social change. The biblical scholars were in Baltimore to participate in the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, the world's largest academic association of biblical scholars. At the annual meeting, one can hear scholarly papers presenting cutting edge research on virtually any biblical text or aspect of the biblical world imaginable, but rarely would one encounter, especially first-hand, how the Bible was read and appropriated in non-academic contexts. This might be appropriate for a meeting dedicated to the enhancement of professional scholarship, but to a small group of scholars studying poverty in the biblical world, it seemed insufficient. That the Bible has much to say about poverty in its own day is beyond dispute, but does the Bible's teaching on poverty, emerging from a very different social and economic world, continue to have a role in addressing today's social and economic concerns? The exchange in Baltimore was born out of this question.

The dialogue partners for the biblical scholars in Baltimore were a group of church and community leaders associated with the United Workers, a local human rights organization led by low-wage workers fighting for fair development to end poverty. Through education, advocacy, and protest, they fight for the human rights values of dignity, respect, and sanctity of human life. They seek a living wage for workers, including the right to healthcare, education, and fair-treatment at work (for more information on the organization, see their website at unitedworkers.org).

What is particularly relevant for our discussion here, and the foundation for the exchange in Baltimore, is that the United Workers have also engaged Bible study as part of their educational outreach. Using a dialogical approach, taking both text and context seriously, the Bible is read from the perspective of the poor on behalf of the poor; as such, it speaks out against injustice, holds up God's preference for the poor, and articulates a vision for a more just society. Such readings are empowering and provide resources for the United Workers' struggle for human rights. Moreover, they attest to the continuing vitality of the biblical tradition to address current social and economic concerns; the readings of the poor underscore the Bible's liberative message (see further Thomas Kelly's contribution to this volume).

The Baltimore exchange between biblical scholars and labor organizers gives evidence of the Bible's continuing relevance to address social and economic concerns. Indeed, one may suggest that the Bible is most relevant on issues of poverty because such issues are central to so much of the biblical tradition. Throughout both the Hebrew Bible (the Christian Old Testament) and the New Testament, God expresses a preferential concern for the poor, the oppressed, and the downtrodden. Although the social and economic world of ancient Israel is vastly different from our own social and economic world, the condition of poverty remains much the same. The poor, in both worlds, are simply those who are vulnerable, in material need, and have not benefited from the social and economic structures of the society, regardless of the many causes of poverty. And to these people, largely because they are vulnerable and in need, God offers protection, provision, and blessing, and commands his people to do likewise. To be sure, not all the biblical texts concerned with the poor are altruistic (see the author's contribution to this volume), nor is the identification of the poor in contemporary societies unproblematic (see J. J. Carney's contribution to this volume), but the Bible's mandate to care for the poor is unambiguous.

That the Bible's teaching on poverty can play a prominent role in social and economic concerns today is the assumption that underlies all the papers of this volume. The papers had their origin in the annual symposium sponsored by the Kripke Center at Creighton University, February 14-15, 2013. Nineteen scholars from Creighton University and around the nation gathered to discuss the role of poverty in the Bible and its implications for current social and economic concerns. All but three of the papers presented at the symposium are published here.

The papers are divided into two parts. In the first part, biblical scholars address what the Bible says about the poor, or how reading it from the context of the poor shapes the meaning of the biblical text. In the second part, scholars of varying disciplines respond to the biblical message on poverty from within their own academic contexts: ethics, theology,

history, business, and finance. Together, the papers present a compelling interpretation of the significance of poverty in the Bible and its continuing relevance for today.