

WICKED RICH

WICKED POOR

The Economic Cri\$!\$ in the Book of Job, vol. 1

Keith Ruckhaus

DeVaRim Press / Littleton, Colorado

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By Keith Ruckhaus

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To my patient, loving and “strong” wife of 35 years, Gayla.

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INTRODUCTION

A few years back a well-known politician set out to address the problem of poverty in America. The attempt was largely fueled by a sentiment embraced in his political party that too many people were too reliant on government assistance. Worse even, the poor felt entitled to that assistance. Paul Ryan's evaluation of poverty was commendable, especially coming from a political party that often appears insensitive to the poor. Ryan accepted the criticism of his first attempt and set out a second time to look seriously into poverty and to suggest viable government policy to reduce it. In his second attempt, Ryan claims he did so more as a concerned citizen than as a politician. This time, even his critics welcomed his efforts as more balanced and reasonable. Nonetheless, Ryan did not abandon the presumption that a distinction must be made between the worthy and the unworthy poor. The assumption that those in poverty deserve it still persists.

Paul Ryan reflects an aspect common to nearly all of us who grew up in white, middle-class neighborhoods in the baby-boomer era. We knew to avoid poor neighborhoods all the while wagging our heads in remorseful disgust at such deplorable conditions. While thanking God that we did not live that way, we would ponder how we might help those poor people. In a small way, this sentiment is a good place to start. At least there is a sense that poverty amidst wealth and prosperity is not good or right.

Since the economic collapse of 2008, awareness of economic disparity is now heightened and contentious. I find myself much closer to "those poor people" than I previously thought possible and my perspective being substantially altered. My frustration that something is not right is compounded by bewilderment as to how I can personally take action. After all, the Bible sternly warns us of patronizing God with prayers for the poor all the while not doing anything about it.

Two things disturb me and provide incentive for this book.

From the biblical perspective, Ryan framed the question of poverty all wrong. Check it out for yourself. The Bible rarely addresses the poor as if *they* are a problem. On the contrary, the Bible addresses the problem of wealth nearly everywhere and often in the harshest of terms. The words of James will suffice for now: "Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you" (James 5:1). The biblical perspective is simple and clear: wealth is a huge problem, not poverty. It disturbs me how the very people claiming the highest regard for the Bible are astoundingly ignorant of this fact. What Bible are they reading?

A friend of mine related a conversation he had with his Jamaican coworker about American Christians who are totally absorbed in issues of

sexual conduct all the while advocating contra-biblical ideas about wealth and poverty.

*“What did Jesus say about sex?” the Jamaican asked.
“No ’ting! NO ’TING!” was his own rhetorical reply.
“What did Jesus say about economic inequality?
“Every’ting. EVERY’TING”*

Nearly half of the human population will live out their entire life in poverty. All the while, the world’s wealth continues to migrate into the coffers of a few. God finds this completely unacceptable. Christians should also. A standard Orthodox prayer over the evening meal succinctly proclaims God’s desire: *The poor shall eat and be satisfied*. Often times in the Roman Mass, the words are sung; *the Lord hears the cries of the poor. Blessed be the Lord*. Many faith traditions provide liturgical weight to God’s concern for the poor.

It will be part of my ongoing project to enunciate just how clearly the God of the Bible finds wealth problematic and poverty unacceptable. In the antiphons of the Divine Liturgy (Ps 103 and 146), Orthodox Christians are reminded every Sunday that:

- the world humans inhabit belongs to God and is a gift from God
- the goods of the earth should be enjoyed by all humans
- God executes justice for the oppressed
- worldly wisdom and wealth are deceptive and not to be trusted
- God desires that the hungry be fed, prisoners be released (referring mainly to debtor imprisonment), the humiliated be restored
- God is especially concerned about those on the margins of society: the immigrant, the homeless, the widow, the parentless.
- God works against the wicked (who are always associated with wealth in Bible).

The second disturbing aspect of this issue for me is the sense that I cannot do much about it. I am not a power player in today’s world. I struggle like the majority of Americans to financially keep my head barely above water. I have little time or resources to be an instrument of change.

Several religious responses to economic disparity played out in Israel’s ancient history, and as I see it, they are still opted for today, albeit with ever decreasing viability.

One response is to simply distort God’s concern for the poor into God’s concern for the rich.¹ This view is essentially mythological and that espoused by Job’s “friends.” In essence, it is a pretty simple formula: if you do right, God will make you prosper, if you don’t, God will ruin you. The “doing well” has less to do with acting in right and just ways and more to do with a kind of piety that plays the “invisible hand” of the often idiosyncratic and bi-polar whims of the gods (and goddesses). The “prosperity gospel” has had a tremendous appeal in today’s world especially among those hovering at poverty levels.² If you have enough faith, you too can prosper. The fundamental appeal is to emulate the rich with the elusive goal of bettering one’s situation.

A second kind of response is to villainize wealthy individuals or institutions and seek to destroy or capture their wealth. Revolutions, unfortunately, have proven that they are just that—a revolving door, replacing one set of villains with another set with the same fundamental flaw and the same disparity. Not all revolutions, however, end in disaster as most Americans like to point out about their revolution.

A third option, which I have personally acted out for many years is to retreat from the world into a life of quiet piety. I can immerse myself in a cloistered religious community where economic language is spiritualized. Forgiveness of debt merely refers to not holding a grudge. Depravity relates only to the soul. Economic arrangements are essentially neutral, and only people are corrupt. “Money is not evil,” we quote from the Bible, “but the *love* of money is the root of all evil.” I have not yet met a Christian who willingly professed to loving money. It makes me wonder why Paul ever bothered to say such a thing. Even worse, the “all evil” part is completely ignored. This kind of pious arrangement works out well for the rich. It is as Napoleon once said: religion keeps the poor from killing the rich.

There is a fourth option that I believe is the Biblical option. The wealthy need conversion. The Bible expends great effort in appealing to the rich and powerful to yield their will and wealth to the God of love. It is not only wealthy individuals that need transformation, but our view of wealth also. Thus, a healthy dose of the revolutionary option must still be interjected. It is also a matter of a collective conversion, a revolutionary and evolutionary leap of consciousness and one which I must engage in as well.

This is precisely what the book of Job and really all of biblical wisdom is attempting to do—persuade the ones controlling the resources to subordinate their energies and desires to God’s kingdom and will.

The little that I can do I am setting out to do: persuade the rich to yield to God and to clarify, for myself and others, the biblical perspectives

¹ See Rossi. *Jesus Goes to McDonald*.

² According to Rossi this has had a devastating effect in Brazil. Rossi. Ibid 85.

on wealth, prosperity, and economy. It feels insurmountable, but at least I have the biblical prophets as my guide and consolation. I also have the prayer Jesus taught us to pray: *Our Father in heaven, hallowed it be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*

The more I read the Bible the more I understand the idealism present there. This idealism is, in fact, one of the most amazing things about it. It relentlessly appeals to and believes in the ability and inherent goodness of humans to fill out the goodness of creation. God believes we can do it. But it will take conversion.

This book lines up behind a myriad of commentaries on the book of Job. Always ringing in my ear are the words of one of my Old Testament professors from seminary: “Listen to the text.” Give the text a chance to speak for itself. This commentary, then, sticks to the text as it is presented. I offer “blow-by-blow” comments as we go, paying particular attention to words, peculiar phrases, the structure of text, and the suspicious absence of all of these. This approach is admittedly tedious and diminishes its appeal for a lot of readers. In today’s world, we read for speed, but honestly, sometimes it takes work to understand. The Job scroll demonstrates this more than other biblical books. The “wisdom” comes by participation in the process.

Although I have yet to fully articulate my approach, I call it traditional because it aligns with the nature of the Bible as a codification of streams of tradition. The Hebrew Bible as we have it now took shape over a thousand-year process where various traditions—oral, ritualized, and written—combined, competed, collaborated and adapted, always guided however, by what I call in this book *the profound sense*. The traditional approach is a synthetic weaving of textual analysis, forensic evidence gleaned from archeology and the social sciences *with* the faith communities that created, preserved and interpreted these texts. Most importantly, it is with the communities that *lived* these traditions in an on-going drama of humans engaged with a living God.

I write biblical commentary because I believe it has critical relevance for the times that I live in so I insist on bridging the gap. I also believe it impacts me. My own experiences shape how I understand the text. I don’t resist this, but rather, I integrate that into the traditional approach. Faith communities and individuals *today* are a part of the living stream of tradition. Admittedly, there is a bit of hubris offered here. I work through the book of Job convinced that the interaction between economics and theology has been missed.

It would be helpful to define a few words or phrases that I use throughout the book.

ANE—Often I will speak in terms of the Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) world. I concede the presumption inherent in such sweeping descriptions given the variety of situations and details one could interject. Yet several scholars I encountered in this work confidently speak of general practices and beliefs that demonstrate commonality over a broad swath of territory and time. Dominique Charpin’s comment will suffice for the moment: “Despite indisputable regional differences, we should not forget the fundamental unity which existed throughout the Amorite Near East.”³ This is especially true of imperial ideology, which is a particular focus in this book.⁴

Bless and blessing—Bless is a word thrown around today, and it nearly always means “life is good.” For many, to bless or receive blessing carries strong emotional and religious connotations that can stray from its biblical moorings. One might get quite uncomfortable with the economic and political implications I present in this book, stripping away some of the mystical or magical element of it. I define bless basically as the ability or empowerment to survive and thrive. It describes the universal goal of both ancient wisdom and modern economics—the pursuit of well-being. We all want to “live long and prosper.” There is an edgy tension to the saying: “I am blessed.” On the one hand, it gratuitously places one’s “all good” situation within the context of a perceived cosmic order. On the other hand, it can be ruthlessly comparative. Compare and despair. “I am blessed” as compared to what or who? Often times, it is compared to the vast majority of earthlings who are not blessed. Some do not survive at all. Most survive, but don’t ever thrive. Most of all, it implies some mystical hand of selection. Call it sovereign will, favor or luck, but it nearly always creates a tier system where the ones who aren’t blessed endure existential crisis all the while being lectured by those who are. Hence, we have the problem of Job and many post-exilic Jews.

Economy or Market—Following the lead of Jean-Pierre Dupuy from his book *Economy and the Future*, I will occasionally use Economy or Market as if it was a formal noun, a formidable actor or presence. Dupuy deliberately uses a capitalized plural singular in order to emphasize the mythological nature in which economics are spoken of on the world stage. He compares it to the Hebrew word for God, *Elohim*, which is the plural form of gods. “What could this plural form, the “markets,” really signify, if not the manifold and intertwining tentacles of a great monster, sluggish, craven, and dumb, which takes fright at the slightest noise—and in this way

³ Charpin, *Gods, Kings, and Merchants*, 8.

⁴ Waters, *Ancient Persia*, 21. Steinkeller, “Introduction; Labor in the Early States,” 31.

brings about the very thing that it shrinks from in terror: turbulence in the global markets?”⁵ In a similar way, economic conceptions in the ANE world were personified as “women wisdom” “the strange women” and the “strong wife” found in Proverbs. This use of “Economy” or “Market” is not to be confused with the more technical uses of economy, markets, and market systems employed in economics as an academic discipline. Economy and markets are needed and wanted, but they are often times spoken of with an overblown importance, as if there was a divine or mystical will driving it.

Managerial Elites—I use this term to broaden the focus of controlling agents in the ANE world away from simply ruling elites (aristocracy) and political and military alignments. Anne Fitzpatrick-Mckinley uses the term “indigenous elites.” Elites of antiquity are set apart and above the rest by their involvement in managing resources, mainly land and labor. They control territories primarily because they managed the production of its resources and the policing of violence.⁶ Fitzpatrick-McKinley points to another defining characteristic of an elite—their inclusion in a network of elites. The main goal of an elite network was to insure the distribution of power and resources in a particular way.⁷ The network operates primarily to insure the social and economic status of an elite. Managerial elites include: kings, clan elders, merchants, traders, priests, military leaders, and labor organizers. It also includes a considerable amount of support staff usually with valued skills. Scribes, for instance, were elites by virtue of their craft; even though most of them were not necessarily well-off.

“The way things are”—It is perhaps not scholarly to reference an entertaining movie, but a peculiar image of a duck in the movie *Babe* is seared in my mind.⁸ The duck, who is slated to be butchered for Christmas dinner, is constantly badgered not to resist “the way things are” on the farm by the other farm animals. The duck, however, steadfastly and loudly protests: “But *the way things are* stinks!” In many ways, “the way things are” approximates Margaret Thatcher’s TINA adage: “there is no alternative.” All must step in line and accept systems as they are regardless of the disastrous consequences. The movie draws us into imagining (just like the Bible) the possibility of “the way things can be.”

⁵ Dupy, *Economy and the Future*, ix.

⁶ Ruckhaus, “Tribing, Distribing, Contribing, and Retribing.”

⁷ Fitzpatrick-Mckinley, *Empire, Power and Indigenous Elites*, 20.

⁸ Noonan, *Babe*.

IS MONEY EVERYTHING?

*Feasts are made for laughter;
wine gladdens life,
and money meets every need. (Ecc 10:19)*

The financial collapse of 2008 altered my understanding of how to get along in American society. The change did not immediately happen. For a while, I still balanced two part-time jobs and proactively worked toward finding one job with a decent salary and benefits. Within two years, I was completely out of work and struggling to find anything. Working a temporary minimum wage job, I worked with a wide variety of folks all saying the same thing: “I never imagined that I would be in this situation.” Whether the situation was temporary or a sign of a more permanent shift, we were reluctant by-products of a systemic breakdown. My wife and I went from decently getting by to just treading water. We no longer had confidence that our situation could improve; instead, we struggled to not lose more ground.

More significantly, people began to view me differently, especially those not struggling financially. At best there was suspicion about my circumstances; at worst, I found myself among the “takers,” the “moochers,” the lazy people of society who deserve their wretched state. Most significant for me, however, is the experience of becoming invisible.¹ Time after time in social circumstances, I noticed how much people ignored me if the whiff of money was faint. I had become one of the disposables of economic vitality along with plastic containers, junked cars, abandoned toxic mines and industrial plants, homeless or criminals in jail. Like our waste dumps, we don’t recognize the mass of garbage we produce because we don’t see it. It is as anthropologist David Graeber aptly describes: “Reducing all human life to exchange means...that the vast majority of the human race...melts away into the background.”²

Waste is generally not recyclable. Many people experience the painful truth of this once they have been “let go.” In the local paper today, a woman related her descent into homelessness due to her husband’s illness. She sadly reports that “no one wants to hire the homeless.” In the slums of

¹ Dupuy also notices the invisibility of low-consumption humans, labeling it “the statistical dissolution of personal identity.” Our insistence on self-sufficiency has created the environment where: “We ourselves are constantly telling other people that they do not exist for us.” *Economy and the Future*, 76, 123.

² Graeber, *Debt*, 127.

Brazil, people must lie about their residence and social status if they want any chance of employment.³

It took a while for American society to feel the impact. But slowly, the political and social climate polarized. Suddenly, every social institution was under intense financial scrutiny. The battle cry still resonates to this day: “Why should *I* pay for *them*?” Everything in human life from education to sanitation, from health to recreation, and from committing crimes to having sex are reduced to solvency and affordability, to the intense social scrutiny of the ledger sheet. America now suffers from wholesale denial of interdependency. “All human values,” Dupuy protests, “are reducible to a single question: how much are you willing to pay for this value?”⁴

Exchange: What Mediates Human Existence?

The objection is standard—money is just a tool; it is neutral. It can be used for good or bad depending on the user. How ironic, then, that the sole purpose of a piece of paper to designate a value, like a 1-dollar bill, should be viewed as valueless! Even if money was neutral, economist Tomas Sedlacek reminds that “being value-free is a value in itself, a *great value* to economists anyway.”⁵

Limiting the understanding of money to mere utility runs along the same vein as the logic of technology and for a simple reason: economics and technology feed off each other. We obsessively deny that the device, especially a power tool, radically changes the *kind* of work done and the *way* the worker proceeds. Even more so, the automated tool alleviates the worker all together while excessively producing goods that cannot be reasonably consumed.⁶ It inevitably blurs the distinction between master and slave. Who is serving who?

Money, whether virtual or physical, is a tool, but it is much more. Tell a person with little money or access to technology that money is not everything. They won’t believe you and for good reason. For them, money is the absolute gatekeeper to all resources and viability. Hungry and want food? —Got money? Homeless and want shelter? —Got money? Need to defecate and need a toilet? —Got money?⁷ Unemployed and need a phone,

³ Rossi. *Jesus Goes to McDonalds*, 82.

⁴ Dupuy, *Economy and the Future*, 72.

⁵ Sedlacek, *The Economics of Good and Evil*, 7.

⁶ In my view, Jacque Ellul effectively challenges the very notion of the neutrality of technology. Ellul argues that technique is driven by its very nature toward the *most efficient way* regardless of ethics or human will. *The Technological Bluff*.

⁷ Yes, this is a crude example, but one need only work with homeless people for a brief time to realize how the daily need to relieve oneself requires considerable negotiation. In many large cities, one must pay to use a toilet.

computer, transportation, someone to watch your children and a network of business connections to get a job? —Got money? Have a mental or physical disability and need medication or therapy? —Got money?

Money does not just give access to resources; it mediates worth to a human. Notice, for instance, that street people never ask for anything other than money. It is not just to buy booze. It also means that they can be treated with some level of decency when they can buy a hamburger rather than eat what is given to them.

In his book *The Economics of Good and Evil*, economist Tomas Sedlacek forcefully argues against the presumption of modern economics that it occupies some objective, neutral position in modern society. “It is a paradox that a field that primarily studies values wants to be value-free. One more paradox is this: a field that believes in the invisible hand of the market wants to be without mysteries.”⁸

Along with the homeless, the ancient writers of the Hebrew scriptures understood much more than some proponents of free market capitalism about what mediates life.⁹ The Bible calls it *blessing*. Blessing is the critical conduit in order to survive and thrive. One must be in good standing with this sacred realm, this invisible hand in order to procure blessing.

Procuring blessing from a patron god is a dominant concern in the book of Genesis with the semi-nomadic clan of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Blessing in this biblical sense is, according to Claus Westermann, a critical element that enables a human to grow, prosper, maintain and contribute in the world. Blessing is a “vital power without which no living being can exist.” Blessing secures survival and enables growth. It is “both internal and external—the inner power of the soul and the good fortune that produces that power.”¹⁰ One economist calls it freedom: “it is the freedom to live a good life and to do the things that make life worth living.”¹¹

Blessing is always mediated. It is not generated from within. No one could just go out and get some and bring it back to his house for private consumption. If this sounds like hocus-pocus, one only need listen to a business news channel to come away with the same impression about the mediating presence of “the market.” After all, the Dow is merely an indication of how people ‘feel’ about the way things are going. Yet, as Pope Francis complains, we are more concerned that the Dow has dropped a few

⁸ Sedlacek, *The Economics of Good and Evil*, 7.

⁹ The book of Genesis, where the mysterious power of blessing is prominent, places the story of faith in the context of wandering, “homeless” Arameans in the land of Canaan.

¹⁰ Claus Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church*, 18.

¹¹ Angus Deaton, *The Great Escape*, 2.

points than that hundreds of people die each day on the street. It is what Dupuy calls “economystification.”¹²

This critical element that humans need to survive and thrive, this generative force, is essentially religious because it mediates human interactions and survival itself.¹³ There must be and always has been some “presence” that stands between the “goods” that every human needs or wants and an all-out and violent free-for-all grab for them. This “presence,” can be, but by no means necessarily so, called gods or goddesses. It can equally be named a temple, a monarchy, a bank, luck, providence, fate, good fortune, the way things are, or the global economy. In almost all cases, IT is spoken of in terms of having a certain will, mind, or logic which is always communicated through a story. The story is absolutely essential when the distribution of “goods” inevitably proves disproportional. The story provides the explanation and logic for why this is so.¹⁴

Blessing or quality of life or the ability to survive and thrive is religious because it mediates, and it mediates through sacrifice. Sacrifice, however, holds no meaning outside the context of the primary story a community tells itself. Temples, above all else, control the narrative.¹⁵ Communal stories and economics are essentially the same or at least after the same thing according to Sedlacek: “All economics is, in the end, economics of good and evil. It is the telling of stories by people of people to people. Even the most sophisticated mathematical model is, de facto, a story, a parable, our effort to (rationally) grasp the world around us.”¹⁶ The primary communal story must appease or mediate to some level the anger, frustration, consternation, anxiety, and potential violence of the community. It explains why some abundantly thrive while others (often the majority) barely survive. It does this by means of sacrifice and the story encasing it.

Sacrifice is a commonly used word today and holds the same essential meaning as those of ancient times when tribal communities eliminated, either by slaughter or expulsion, selected members or

¹² Dupuy, *Economy and the Future*, 34.

¹³ The mediating role of religion in society is not the only defining characteristic of religion, but it is certainly fundamental. The historical relationship between religion, the state, and economic life is of course complex. David Graeber’s book, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, effectively grapples with the complexities. In the most ancient of societies, the complex distribution of goods and services were first centered in temples and later alongside monarchies. Graeber, *Debt*, 43-87.

¹⁴ Keith Ruckhaus, “The Story Line.”

¹⁵ It is no accident that writing developed in temples along with sacrifice and the distribution of goods. There, the primary function of writing was to keep record of inventory and debts and to aid in the telling and retelling of the primary stories to enculturate the elites. See: Graeber, *Debt*, 42-87 and David M. Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart*.

¹⁶ Sedlacek, *Economics of Good and Evil*, 6.

representative surrogates of the group. The selected victims are necessarily and reasonably disposed of for the good of the rest. Sacrifice redirects the collective anger and potential violence away from the community. The best sacrificial victims of the community function as the representation of the mediating presence when it is viewed as the unfortunate “waste” of doing business. It is invisible and voiceless to the community that expelled it. The common phrase, “he needs to go,” is a telltale sign of the sacrificial society we are inundated with.

The sacred mediating presence of the distribution of “goods” is not only evident in the biblical patriarch’s pursuit of blessing but also in the ubiquitous presence of temples in the ancient world. Viewed as an absolute necessity for cities, temples are always situated behind walls and next to the king’s palace. They determine the value of goods based on sacrifice, i.e. a relationship to the sacred. In some ancient societies, the very concept of a metal coin holding a certain value came into being by its association with temple sacrifices.¹⁷ Temples were the sacred deposit boxes of wealth and sacrifice the “absolute value” behind any currency.¹⁸

Economy or the Market¹⁹ has now become the purveyors of the sacred, supplanting politics and religion. Economists are the makeover of prophets and financiers are the new priestly class. When people say that money or technology is just a neutral tool, they simply miss the profound level that the sacred has always played in human societies where the means to survive and thrive are inextricably bound to social (and most often arbitrary) arrangements of distribution and exchange.²⁰ Jean-Pierre Dupuy regrets the capitulation of all human activity to economic terms. Humankind is now completely transformed into *homo economicus*, and he warns of dire consequences for us if we fail to comprehend that transformation.²¹

The reality that humanity is now becoming *homo economicus* is increasingly recognized in a wide variety of circles from philosophers to entertainers, from economists to politicians, and from theologians to the homeless. Leon Wieseltier declares that even “the discussion of culture is being absorbed into the discussion of business” where “quantification is the most overwhelming influence upon the contemporary American understanding of, well, everything.”²² In his book *Jesus Goes to McDonalds*, theologian Luiz Rossi observes the “commodification of life”

¹⁷ Richard Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind*.

¹⁸ Graeber, *Debt*, 59.

¹⁹ Dupuy, *Economy and the Future*, ix.

²⁰ John Rapley, “How Economics Became Religion”

²¹ Dupuy, *Economy and the Future*, xii. The term *homo economicus* was first coined by critics of John Stuart Mill’s political philosophy. They objected to Mill’s seeming reduction of humanity to mere utility.

²² Leon Wieseltier, “Among the Disrupted,”

where everything is reduced to economic terms. Jurgen Moltmann echoes the sentiment. We are now in a total market society.²³ Dupuy declares: “The role Economy plays is exorbitant by any reasonable standard...Not only has the influence of Economy spread throughout the world, it has taken over our very ways of thinking about the world.”²⁴ Even entertainers understand the transformation. In an interview, comedian Dave Chapelle responds to the worn-out adage that money isn’t everything. “Money is the fuel of choices. Money gives me choices, so that’s not nothing. That’s something.”²⁵ Anthropologist David Graeber also speaks of the “quantification” of all aspects of human existence and the tendency of money “to reduce all human relations to exchange, as if our ties to society, even the cosmos itself, can be imagined in the same terms as a business deal.”²⁶

And many perceive the religious or mythological feel of this new climate calling it “an idolatry of data,” or an “antitheology.” In response to the statement on the American dollar “in God we trust,” Bill Maher retorts: “Americans don’t worship God, they worship money.” In satirical fashion, Maher astutely observes the sacred connection of money, noting the redundancy to printing God on it.²⁷ Dupuy compares the plural use of “the Market” in a similar way to a mythological monster: “What are we left with? Men and women in positions of power who, by prostrating themselves before a phantasm, transform it into something real and, at the same time, endow it with extraordinary power.”²⁸

The Book of Job and Late Modern Economics

What do post-modern *homo economicus*, ancient religious notions of blessing and sacredness and the book of Job have in common? I propose a lot.

The concerns addressed in the book of Job are best understood in the context of the post-exilic Jewish community seeking to reconstitute a national identity as a frontier province of the Persian Empire (roughly 530 – 400 B.C.E). Like our post-modern and perhaps post-religious and post-political world, some ancient Jewish elites struggled for clarity in a time of deep social crisis exacerbated by the complete breakdown of long

²³ Jurgen, Moltmann, *God for a Secular*, 250-251.

²⁴ Dupuy, *Economy and the Future*, xii.

²⁵ Chapelle, Dave. Interview with David Letterman

²⁶ Graeber, *Debt*, 18.

²⁷ “If there’s one place God should not be, it’s on money. One is a supreme, all-powerful entity that Americans worship above all else. And the other is God.” Huffingtonpost, “Bill Maher’s New Rule About ‘God’ On Money.”

²⁸ Jean-Pierre Dupuy, ix.

established social structures relied on to mediate the production and distribution of the good.²⁹

Job is about a crisis of narrative, a crisis like our post-modern situation over economics. There is, as Sedlacek says, “a battle of stories and various metanarratives.” And Sedlacek approaches our current tendency to reduce everything to the ledger sheet with nearly the same torturous anxiety as Job. “Is there an economics of good and evil? Does it pay to be good, or does good exist outside the calculus of economics?”³⁰

As I explore the book of Job, we will soon enough discover how elusive the essential question is. In fact, most of the book is a strong protest against framing the question of how best to secure “the good” in a particular way. Simultaneously, Job struggles deeply and perhaps unsuccessfully to reformulate the question. The tedious cycle of point and counterpoint between Job and his “friends” is intended to draw us into the struggle. We too must forcefully rend ourselves from the nearly ubiquitous convention to frame our procuring of the good in the language of economics. And if we are willing, we too must listen to a mysterious voice in the whirlwind that refuses to be circumscribed in human language, whether alphabetical or mathematical.

The rest of the book is divided into two sections. Conventionally with biblical commentaries, the historical, literary considerations are presented first followed by the interpretation of the text, and I follow that pattern here. Although the two sections are interrelated, the focus is different. Depending on the interest of the reader, some may choose to first read the interpretive section.

²⁹ The awkward use of the phrase “the good” instead of “goods” or “the good life” is deliberate. As Sedlacek argues, there has been the tendency in economics to move completely away from philosophical categories of morality and ethics toward the veneer of science (*Economics of Good and Evil*, 7-9). By using the phrase “the good,” I remind of the interrelationship between moral, political, and economic choices.

³⁰ Sedlacek, *Economics of Good and Evil*, 6.

Wicked Rich, Wicked Poor



The Job Scroll in its Social and Historical Context

ANCIENT ISRAEL'S SUSPICION OF WEALTH

In my last book, I stated that the term “wicked” in the Bible is nearly synonymous with “rich.”¹ Since then, I have received adverse reactions to such a statement. They remind me of two things: first, there are many wealthy people who are not only good people, but who also work a lot of good in the world; second, there are many poor people who are bad and that posture appears to directly bear on their plight. In both cases, they are right about certain situations that they know about or have experienced. The trouble arises in packing in all kinds of contemporary connotations to the term “wicked” which is generally not in the biblical purview.²

Most importantly for our discussion of Job is that the tension between the “wicked” and the “righteous” is between wealthy elites in ancient Israel. It is a debate in which each side (Job and his colleagues) clings to the righteous claim.³ In a broader sense, however, it is a controversy over the categories of wicked and righteous in an intense social and economic crisis where the stakes are extreme. Anyone of prominence well understood that they could end up as Job did. In modern times, the rich can employ numerous tools to “hedge” their wealth against economic ruin. For most of human history, however, the fall of a fellow aristocrat served quite well to protect or even advance one’s own investments.⁴

Critically, this debate was an internal one. It was not, to put it in contemporary terms, between Christians and atheists, Biblicists and secularists, capitalists and communists, conservatives and liberals or papists

¹ In particular, we are talking about managerial elites who emerged alongside palace/temple city complexes mainly to aid in the administration of tribute exchange. They managed agrarian lands in absence and operated money-lending services to the inevitably indebted village people. Gottwald, “From Tribal Existence to Empire, 14.

² Of course, biblical terms like, “rich,” “wicked,” and “godless” are characterizations just like “Pharisees and Sadducees” are in the gospels. But they refer to clear historical circumstance and players.

³ In ancient Near East, the term “righteous” most often refers to rulers who enact laws of equity, especially implementing periodic cancelation of debts (Michael Hudson, “The Lost Tradition,” 29). It never refers to impoverishment *in and of itself*. In biblical use, the righteous refer to those who trust and fear the Lord. In other words, it refers to those whose main reference point is the Lord and His word which provides a clear socio/economic critique.

⁴ One ancient wisdom text explicitly states that the comforters to the exiled servant are hoping for his demise so they can replace him. (*Ludlul Bel Nemeq* – “I will Praise the Lord of Wisdom,” ANET, 149). The demise of a fellow aristocrat was selective. One exceedingly successful person (like Job) could serve quite well as a scapegoat to protect the entire network of elites from crumbling. This is what Graeber calls, the “communism of the rich.” David Graeber, *Debt*, 326. René Girard’s book on Job especially treats the book of Job from a scapegoat perspective. *Job the Victim of His People*.

and Protestants. It was not an “us” against some foreign entity. It was especially not a debate between the poor and the rich, the haves and the have-nots. Both sides in the righteous/wicked controversy were wealthy (at least at some point), influential Israelites trying to establish themselves in post-exilic *Yehud*, what the Persians called their frontier territory in southern Palestine. It was as Jesus’ confrontation with the Pharisees and Sadducees a conflict over core features of Yahwism, Israelite religion. The wicked were not bad people per se, but they were terrible Yahwists. In fact, their religious piety was simply a civil necessity for their wealth generating ventures. But for many who considered themselves faithful to the Lord, the only dictionary consulted to clarify the meaning of righteous or wicked was the Torah of Moses.

The book of Job portrays the intense debate among Jewish aristocrats in a cutthroat business environment where the stakes are extreme. Job’s plunge from being the perfectly crafted model of the good life to a virtual dead man truly reflects harsh realities.⁵ Assuredly, the tension has as long a history as Israel itself, and it is fraught with the same attempts to starkly separate politics, theology, and economics as is current today.⁶

That the market operates independently from the State is sheer nonsense. Graeber’s book lays down the challenge to that: “In the common-sense view, the State and the Market tower above all else as diametrically opposed principles. Historical reality reveals, however, that they were born together and have always been intertwined.”⁷ Similarly, and to much consternation in the biblical witness, the Market and religion are closely linked. The gods that perpetually tempt Israel are *always* covered in gold and silver.⁸

⁵ Albetz, *A History of Israelite Religion*, 496. More will be explained in the proceeding chapters.

⁶ M.D. Meeks states: “North American churches seem to be able to wrestle on a relatively sustained basis with almost all public issues except those touching on economy. Pastors find it excruciatingly perplexing to preach and teach on the economic life of Christians and of the society in which they live. Church leaders, theological professors, and ecclesiastical bodies often falter when the world wants to know what they have to say about economy.” *God the Economist* 1.

⁷ Graeber, *Debt*, 19. See also, Charpin, *Gods, Kings, and Merchants*.

⁸ The number of times that gold and silver are mentioned in conjunction with idols and images is quite astonishing (Jer 10:4, Isa 40:20 for example). The Torah writers make it quite explicit: “The images of their gods you shall burn with fire. Do not covet the silver or the gold that is on them and take it for yourself, because you could be ensnared by it; for it is abhorrent to the Lord your God.” (Deut 7:25)

Emergence of Israel in the Economic Collapse of the Bronze Age (1400–1000 B.C.E.)

From its very inception, Israel has been suspicious of private wealth accumulation.⁹ To be clear, it is not opposed to blessing, the ability to survive and thrive. It desired what all people desire: a good, decent and thriving life. In its account of its origins, however, the Bible consistently and repeatedly questions the accumulation of wealth, its social good, and its effect on those who obtain it.

Several factors in ancient Israel's development contribute to the Bible's suspicion of wealth accumulation. We first off need to consider David Graeber's sweeping historical assessment of wealth. Throughout nearly all of human history, cultures negatively view the wealthy, mainly because they primarily gain it through usury with its predictable cascade of negative effects.¹⁰ Since the very beginnings of human civilizations, however, humans have been morally confused about usury, viewing it as equally reprehensible, but seemingly unavoidable. Nothing reveals this more than the archaic congealing of debt language (more accurately inability to pay back debt) with guilt language (sin, transgression, guilt, offense, atonement). [Pages skipped]

⁹ William Devers argues: "Israelite religion has been revolutionary from its inception." (*The Bibles Buried Secrets*, Glassman). Gottwald states: "Simply expressed, earliest Israel was in rebellion against the tributary system and the political and religious arrangements that legitimated and enforced it." Gottwald, "From Tribal Existence to Empire," 14.

¹⁰ Graeber. *Debt*, 10. Social isolation, where a person is ripped out of his/her social context, is the primary effect. Once this occurs, argues Graeber, a person can become a commodity, a thing, and can then be exploited and disposed of in an infinite amount of ways, prostitution and slavery being the most notorious.

Wicked Rich, Wicked Poor

THE ECONOMIC CRISIS OF POST-EXILIC *YEHUD*

*An end! The end has come
upon the four corners of the land.
Now the end is upon you. (Ez 7:2)*

*Thus says the Lord God:
Disaster after disaster! See, it comes.
An end has come, the end has come.
It has awakened against you; see, it comes!
Your doom has come to you,
O inhabitant of the land. (Ez 7:5–7)*

The prophet Ezekiel spoke the truth. The Babylonian destruction of the kingdom of Judah in 587 B.C.E. was thorough and complete. Nearly all inhabitants of Judah experienced some degree of systemic collapse, but rural communities remained stable due in large part to imperial demands for tribute.¹

The invaders either killed or exiled nearly all Judean, managerial elites concentrated in urban administrative areas. Others fled, mainly to Egypt. Not all Jews were relocated to Babylon. Many, centered in the hill country north of Jerusalem around *Mizpah*, recovered quickly and were able to carry on quite nicely for centuries.² Poorer constituents likely fled, but quickly returned to rebuild. Remnants of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah persisted in rituals (mainly lament) and recited narratives wherever they were scattered under the vigilant eye of Babylonian and then Persian imperial control.

Hopeful waves of a restored quasi-independent kingdom ebbed and flowed for over a century, mainly from exiles in Babylon most connected to the kingdom of David who had suffered the most loss.³ This hope

¹ Oded Lipschits, “Rural Economy of Judah during the Persian Period,” 255, 256. Fitzpatrick-Mckinley, *Empire, Power and Indigenous Elites*, 219. Leo Purdue, *The Sword and the Stylus*, 120–122.

² Lipschits, “Rural Economy of Judah,” 238. The Benjamin region changed little from Neo-Assyrian to Hasmonean times. Their stable economy, way of life, administration, and material culture suffered little with the Babylonian invasion. See also, Anne Fitzpatrick-Mckinley, *Empire, Power and Indigenous Elites*: 21–26. 41–50.

³ This hope of a revived kingdom of David finds its corpus in 2nd Isaiah texts of the exilic period (Isa 40–55). They not only suffered the most loss, but also struggled with a profound paradigm crisis—the annihilation of the Davidic dynasty and the unconditional Davidic promise.

accelerated with Cyrus's decree that exiles could return to their homelands and rebuild cultic centers and local civic traditions.⁴

For a brief period (525–519 B.C.E) the establishment of a reformed Jewish king and temple seemed within reach with the possible collapse of the Persian empire over Cyrus' successor. The hope, however, was obliterated from the realm of possibility after the Persian king, Darius I, consolidated his power (522–521 B.C.E). After that, imperial control of the Levant was undisputed well beyond the time of the Nehemiah and Ezra restoration projects and the context I am placing the book of Job.⁵ Hopes of a new, resurrected Davidic monarchy were increasingly shelved onto a lofty, dreamy future.⁶

The “wisdom literature” of the Bible—Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes—addressed how any managerial elite was to get on in the meantime within a tributary system. Overt and exclusive expressions of loyalty to any god or king other than the imperial ones could spell ruin. Other than a safe, but clandestine reference to “the fear of God,” allusions to a particular god, his particular ethic and his particular fidelity to a “king” (David) must be cloaked, often times in euphemism and irony, especially in the cosmopolitan world of imperial administration.

The shadow of empire lurks behind every biblical text.⁷ In various ways, biblical traditions and their scribes struggled to react and respond to a ubiquitous, dominant and violent presence whose unwavering agenda is exploitation of resources to fill royal coffers.⁸ Independence from it, although possible to varying degrees, was allusive and dangerous. For the most part, the Bible responds subversively and out of sheer necessity, given its founding narrative centers on a god who miraculously rescued the dominated from the dominator.

Regional Situation from Neo-Assyrian to Persian Periods

The rise of the Neo-Assyrian Empire dramatically altered the whole ancient Near Eastern world even up until Roman times. Essentially, they ushered in the notion of imperial rule. Their propaganda does not refer to

⁴ See the biblical books Haggai, Malachi, Zechariah, Ez 40–48.

⁵ The dating of both the Nehemiah/Ezra reforms and the book of Job are continuously debated. It is beyond the scope of this work to wade through such waters. Certainly, the book of Job could relate to nearly any period from the exile on. Purdue dates it early on in the exile. (Purdue, *Stylus and the Sword*, 118) I will briefly explain below why I chose this period to place the book of Job.

⁶ See my book, *As Though We Were Dreaming*.

⁷ The Assyrians had undisputed control of the area for nearly two centuries, establishing Ramat Rahel as its royal administrative center. Any “wealth” that Judeans acquired was “hand-me-downs” from the Assyrian tribute system. Lipschits, “Rural Economy,” 239.

⁸ Anne Fitzpatrick-McKinley, *Empire, Power and Indigenous Elites*, 11.

itself as “empire,” but more of a central administrator of real estate proprietors extracting rent. They are “lords” over lands and labor, the sole means of production and distribution.⁹ They claim above all else to be the primary beneficiary of tribute. Tribute—the networked and upward extraction and concentration of wealth—is the essential driver of “empire”¹⁰ to which all other machinations operate around it. The upward extraction of wealth powerfully exerted downward pressure on everyone else to keep tribute steadily increasing.¹¹ Nevertheless, regional players from dynastic families to clans from clustered labor or military groups to powerful traders or merchants could benefit quite well. A similar situation exists today where the mantra of “jobs, jobs, jobs,” pounds into the heads of even the poorest who must contribute to economic “growth” if they hope to survive.

[Pages skipped]

⁹ Often translated as *satraps*, the Persian *dahyu* could be either understood as an administration over “peoples” or “country.” The common element, however, is land. Waters. *Ancient Persia*92.

¹⁰ Matt Waters. *Ancient Persia*, 51.

¹¹ Fitzpatrick-Mckinley, *Empire, Power and Indigenous Elites*, 35.

THE PRODUCTION AND PRESENTATION OF THE JOB SCROLL

Narrowing the authorship down to a particular person or personality and a particular situation is always problematic. Even so, critical to any interpretation is identifying to some degree how this text came to be and how it was used. It was then like it is today, a “book” (scroll) is a product employing a staff of contributors and a considerable economic and political investment. It is produced with an intended audience in mind to which they hope to instruct or influence in some way. What we assuredly don’t have in most books of the Bible including Job is a single, clever and creative individual conjuring up literature in his hideaway bungalow. “Instead of books, there was the stream of tradition; instead of authors, there were scribes.”¹

That being said, there are a few things we can confidently say about the text production. The producers of the text were immersed in the world of managerial elites. They could be elite themselves and could conceivably experience a Job-like demise from their ranks. They were Judean scribes who regardless of their geographic proximity to the temple in Jerusalem, were tightly linked to it by two critical functions that only their craft provided. For one, they enabled liturgical functions such as the chanting of psalms and the public presentation of the national traditions (Torah). As regards both of these, as impoverished as Judean scribes were in the exilic and post-exilic periods, they amazingly put themselves to the task of recreating, compiling, and archiving an impressive amount of “national” documents without the usual royal sponsorship.² Second, they were engaged in every aspect of the temple economy. As administrative personnel, they accounted for taxes and tithes, exchanged money, measured grain and recorded animal offerings.

Secondary to their temple affiliation but still critically linked to it was their civic participation in judicial and education *for* managerial elites. They were the primary educators of their children and their lawyers and accountants in managing personal estates. They witnessed, probably more than anyone, the repeated and anguished stripping of the debt-ridden by the wealthy Judean creditors *backed by the temple institution*. They witnessed *and recorded* the treacherous “looting” of many “at the “gates.”³ But they

¹ Van der Toon, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible*, 4.

² The works of David M. Carr, Rainer Albertz and Leo Purdue cited in this book all hold to an exilic and post-exilic codification of most books now found in the Hebrew bible, especially the formation of the Pentateuch.

³ Legal and economic transactions were done “at the gates” probably during harvest festivals when farming loans come due. The prophets, Psalms, Proverbs and Job as well as other

also must have been in close personal contact with other elites agonizing over the demands for tribute, support of the temple project, managing their own estates and honestly investing in the radical “neighbor” ethic inherent in the prophetic tradition. All the while, the elites trying to be in solidarity with their poorer neighbors operated in a merciless winner-take-all business atmosphere with unscrupulous competitors.

But I will start by exploring what seems to me to be an inherent contradiction with “wisdom” literature.⁴ As Carr points out about ancient literature in general and what Purdue points out about “wisdom” literature in particular, both are the product of and in the service of empire. All virtue, knowledge and utility move ultimately toward loyalty to the king, and I would add fidelity to the tributary system based on retributive justice.⁵ Charpin succinctly states:

*It should be mentioned, moreover, that the written word was also in the service of power. It was used largely by kings and their administrations to control the population.*⁶

[Pages skipped]

ancient literature attest to the vile and unpleasant nature of these proceedings. Ps 127:5, *Councils of Wisdom* (ANET 595–609). See also, Walter Brueggemann’s commentary on 2 Sam 12:6-12 in *David’s Truth*, 63.

⁴ Here, I agree with Carr. Although the designation of this ancient literary type has been called “wisdom,” it is misleading. They are “long-duration” texts designed to indoctrinate, educate and enculturate. Carr, 5. “Mesopotamian concept of nemequ was a far-reaching one, with implications in all areas of life and from all domains of intellectual activity.” Paul-Alain Beaulieu, “Babylonian Wisdom Literature,” 18.

⁵ Carr, *Writing on the Tablet*, 169. Purdue, *Sword and Stylus*, 1–18. Paul-Alain Beaulieu, “Babylonian Wisdom Literature,” 7.

⁶ Charpin, *Writing, Law, and Kingship*, 3.

The Economic Collapse of Job



THE BLESSED JOB (JOB 1:1–5)

The other day, my wife and I enjoyed a wonderful Saturday afternoon with some old friends. We share so many thoughts, values, and perspectives that when we get together with them, we cannot stop talking.

There is one subject, however, that is avoided completely. You guessed it—politics. We ventured into the topic that afternoon, but I could immediately sense that entrenchment would be the only outcome. I would again choose friendship over politics and changed the subject.

Why is it that this subject cannot be approached without conjuring up visceral feelings and reactions? At least partially so, it is not politics that is at stake for most people, it is well-being, what the Bible calls blessing. Politics is only a label we give for the story line we tell ourselves about what it takes to survive and to thrive. These story lines are deeply engrained in our heritage and our family traditions because they are inextricably linked to food in our mouths, happy times as children and our hope for the future.

Our personal political will, even to this day, is about economics, —the ordering of the house—and that ordering of things has always been expressed best for us humans in ritual and narrative. An attack on my politics becomes an existential threat, a threat that requires an all-out defense. Our defense has next to nothing to do with facts or accurate descriptions of reality; it is all about upholding the story line.

Job the Uzman

The story of Job begins as an iconic summation of everyone's wishful storyline, what the end picture or goal is. Just as the stories of origins in the first two chapters of Genesis place the end goal in an ancient mythical and mystical past, so does the story of Job. This is standard ancient literary practice.¹ The future is encoded in the past, and when those narratives of times "long ago" are set in near utopian landscapes, they encourage those whose real life is anything but that.² The narrative is framed in an "intentionally archaizing style."³

This peculiar Israelite "theodicy" begins with an extended narrative framework compared to other and more ancient Mesopotamian and Egyptian texts. It immediately signals the character of the book. Stories of "fathers" who faithfully survived as "wandering Arameans" (Deut 26:5)

¹ Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 223. Beaulieu, "The Social and Intellectual Setting of Babylonian Wisdom Literature," 3–10.

² Zvi, "The 'Successful, Wise, Worthy, Wife' 41.

³ Zuckerman, *Job the Silent*, 27.

dodging powerful monarchs and chieftains perfectly framed the faith of exilic and postexilic Judeans. It critically situates and foreshadows the dialogues. In a sense, the narrative here provides the gist of the lengthy dialogue between Job and his friends. It is an abstract of sorts that infuses the dialogues as an extension of the story.⁴ Already, it sets off this “wisdom” as not just for powerful elites or perhaps *not at all* for them.

From the writer’s perspective, Job’s ranch is situated *in the East*, which must have resonated to post-exilic Judeans in several ways. The ambiguous distance, both geographically and historically, immediately presses the tension of human existence.

On the one hand, the *Uz* of the East like the garden of Eden conjures up a kind of paradise. It is an “all-is-good” place like God’s assessment of creation on the sixth day. It is a well-tended and orderly place like the orchard of Eden, a buffer against chaos.

But *Uz*, like Eden, is not entirely idyllic. It is a precarious place that requires vigilant attentiveness. Most small business owners know the feeling. As parochial and quaint as the opening description of Job’s ranch sounds, it is situated in the middle of “all the people of the east.” Job is not isolated nor secluded. He is not his own man going about his own business. His “blessed” situation is within a network of inter-related “peoples” where he, like Abraham, must constantly negotiate arrangements to avoid disaster. House order, economics, must be vigilantly attended to.

The character of Job reminisces patriarchal figures of Genesis like Abraham, Abimelek, and Melchizedek, vestigial yet still breathing memories of a time before the nearly 400-year economic collapse at the end of the Bronze Age. They are nostalgic reminders of a time when clan rulers operated cooperatively with “big institutions” and quasi-independently of urban centers. Job stands as a blackened statue of a life known to be possible where those who lived on the land enjoyed the fruits of it in cooperation with temples and palaces.⁵ The land belonged to them and them to the land. Creditors did not seize the land as well as the families and resources on it. Even amidst tribal conflicts, there was still a sense of mutual indebtedness that sustained communal stability. They were not mere renters impoverishing themselves indebted to the wealth accumulation impulses of managerial elites.⁶

The East is also the starting point of migration. Just as the gates of paradise were shut and as Abraham left his father’s house, so *Uz* is the place one leaves behind, whether forcefully or voluntarily, in order to move

⁴ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 26.

⁵ Steinkeller, “Labor in the Early States,” 26.

⁶ Michael Hudson, *Debt*, 26–30

toward a greater and more lasting reality. The past launches the future, but it does so by de-romanticizing the past. With each absurd exaggeration in the prologue—Job was the greatest “of all” and he lost “all of it” in “one day”—the writer crushes nostalgic re-interpretations of the past that disable the most vibrant choices moving forward. The idyllic style in the prologue is “intentionally fractured fiction.”⁷

By post-exilic times, however, Uz stylistically refers to Edom, the territory immediately to the south of Jerusalem with deep historical ties both positive and negative.⁸ The placement of Job’s ranch here intentionally reverberates for exilic Jews attempting to resettle in *Yehud* and accentuates the beleaguered nature of their (his) existence.⁹ It approximately places Job in the *Beth-Zur* district described in a previous chapter.

The Edomite history parallels that of ancient Israel’s. Both were wanderers who established small flourishing kingdoms in the aftermath of the 400-year collapse of civilization at the end of the Bronze Age. Both held strategic territory at the epicenter of international trade and the buffer zone between rival empires, Egypt to the south and Assyrian and then Babylon to the North. Both were periodically able to control the various inter-tribal rivalries and Arab incursions from the south and enjoy extended seasons of peace and prosperity.

Judah controlled and benefitted from this region for several hundred years before the exile, and it is highly likely that Judeans settled and prospered there. Even though the Bible depicts a completely independent Judah who by miracle held back the Assyrian conquest of Jerusalem, it is more evident that Assyrian control and influence gave strength and unity to Judah. The initial depiction of Job in an alliance of cooperation with his “friends” could very well be a nostalgic remembrance of happier and more prosperous times.¹⁰ That Hebron, the urban hub of the region, means something to the effect of “alliance,” “partner,” or “association,” seems to indicate that it was a place where political, military, and market advocates wove together in a cosmopolitan atmosphere.

The waning of the Assyrian empire, however, brought on a new wave of imperial hostility in the region with the incursion of the Babylonians. The vacuum of imperial oversight brought fresh rounds of Arab and Egyptian advances and inter-tribal competition for control of trade routes. It is possible that the four disasters of Job reflect a historical

⁷ Oeming and Schmid, *Job’s Journey*, 21. On narrative exaggeration for rhetorical impact see Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 32.

⁸ Gen 10:23, 36:28 = 1 Chron 1:42, Jer 25:20, Lam 4:21

⁹ Guillaume locates the setting of Uz further south in Arabian territory. *Studies in the Book of Job with a New Translation*, 1-3.

¹⁰ Thareani, “Forces of Decline and Regeneration,” 224.

sequence of Judah's loss of this territory. Forced by Arabian incursions, Edomites pushed westward and violently competed with Judeans for control of the Negev. They took advantage of the Babylonian seizure of Judah and notoriously aided the Babylonians in the destruction of the Judean empire centered in Jerusalem.

Although rural areas to the immediate north (Bethlehem district) and south of Jerusalem (Keliyah district) survived the Babylonian destruction relatively unscathed, the region further south and west of Jerusalem experienced a complete and enduring collapse. Just as Job is left naked by the end of chapter one, so was post-exilic Negev.¹¹

By the time of the writing of the book of Job, the area southwest of Jerusalem was truly a rough frontier but also the place most available for returning Jewish exiles to homestead. Their resettlement was likely part of a Persian agenda to have Jews repopulate this area in order to prepare for a military campaign against Egypt and to combat overly zealous tribal leaders vying for power and independence. It was a hotbed of contention between tribes and empires.

The Negev was a volatile crossroads on multiple levels. Ultimately empires needed to secure this area. Bitter rivalries flamed not only among tribes but also between rural, urban, and semi-nomadic residences. Like the American frontier, however, it could also be quite lucrative if one landed on the right side of certain alliances that prevailed. That Job controls a huge supply of transport animals, donkeys and camels, indicates that he is a key player in international trade and military supply.¹² Job's situation in chapter one gives the impression of a rather quaint, parochial "house on the Prairie" ranch, but ironically, he is surrounded by hostility, both in the historical/geographical sense and in the text. The Job clan's home is both prosperous and precarious. [Pages skipped]

¹¹ Lipschits, "The Real Economy of Judah during the Persian Period," 237.

¹² Thareani, "Socioeconomic Account," 212. Controlling trade routes was a major occupation of imperial agendas. Waters, *Ancient Persia*, 3.

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