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Engaging Economics: New Testament Scenarios and Early Christian Reception, edited by Bruce W. Longenecker and Kelly D. Liebengood

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Engaging Economics: New Testament Scenarios and Early Christian Reception
Bruce W. Longenecker and Kelly D. Liebengood, Editors
Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, United Kingdom: William B. Eerdmans Publishing
Company, 2009 (336 pages)

This volume contains 13 essays by various theologians and Biblical scholars, as well as an introduction and afterword written by one or both of the editors. As the sub-title suggests, almost all of the contributed papers have been grouped into two sections. As described by the editors in their introduction, the seven articles in the first category “explore the interface between economics and a healthy section of the New Testament,” while the five papers in the second part “examine the reception of particular New Testament texts in the patristic age” (7). The initial section of the book also includes an essay by Peter Oakes, in which he outlines three possible relationships between economics and the Biblical text: the use of economics as an analytical framework, the gathering of economic evidence as the aim of interpretation, and the employment of economic evidence as a resource for interpretation (13).

The chapters in the first major section are ordered in a basically sequential manner with respect to the Biblical canon. After exploring the legacy of property and possessions in the Torah, Stephen Barton maintains that wealth is employed as a symbol by the Gospel writers, in the following manner:

Matthew: Wealth as a symbol of the moral life

Mark: Detachment from wealth as a symbol of eschatological faith

Luke: Economic relations as a symbol of salvation and judgment (the Gospel of Luke), and wealth practices as a symbol of unity in the Holy Spirit (the Acts of the Apostles)

Based on his examination of the Gospels, Barton draws four primary conclusions: economic practices are not at all marginal to Christianity; early Christianity represents a *re-narration* of what really counts and how to attain it; the Gospel *radicalizes, intensifies, confounds, and disrupts* culturally dominant notions of economic goals and means (emphases in the original, in both cases); and there is both continuity and discontinuity with other patterns of value and exchange in early Christianity’s past and present. One of the key arguments in his paper is that neither accommodation to the materialism of our present age, nor the complete renunciation of contemporary economic life, “is a truly Christian performance of Scripture.” (58). As an alternative response, Barton suggests turning to the lives of the saints, as well as to Christian worship, for guidance and inspiration.

Most of the other papers in this section concern themselves with particular issues that arise in specific Gospels and Epistles, as well as in the Acts of the Apostles. Brian Capper explores the question of whether or not the communal nature of property holdings that is described in some portions of the Book of Acts constitutes an example of “virtuoso religion,” which implies a level of spiritual commitment that might be associated with groups such as monastic orders, as opposed to lay persons. Aaron Kuecker maintains that the transformation of personal identity that comes about as a result of the work of the

Holy Spirit brings about “a radically reoriented economic praxis that privileges the ‘other’ over the self in economic exchange” (82), and offers Barnabas as a primary example of this new identity. John Kloppenborg investigates the principle of reciprocity, which he describes as “a characteristic of agrarian societies” (106), in the context of the “measure for measure” verses that can be found in the Gospels of both Mark and Luke. David Downs explores the question of whether or not the relationship between God and the Apostle Paul is one of patronage, a form of social exchange that was prominent in the Roman Empire. Downs concludes that this was not the case, due to the observation that “patronage in the Greco-Roman world was a potentially exploitative relationship based on social control and power,” as well as the fact that Paul never speaks of God in this manner (156). The final two chapters in this section are linked to issues that are derived from specific books: Mariam Kamell’s treatment of matters of wealth and poverty in James, and David Horrell’s exploration of the socioeconomic status of the believers that are profiled in First Peter.

As mentioned previously, the essays in the second section of the book focus on the understanding displayed by early Christian leaders of specific passages of Scripture with economic implications. Bruce Longenecker discusses the issues surrounding the proper interpretation of “the poor” who the Apostle Paul admonishes believers to remember in Galatians 2:10, while David Wilhite contrasts the teachings of Paul and Tertullian on the question of whether or not widows should remarry from a perspective that he defines as “theo-economics.” In his examination of the Book of Revelation, Grant Macaskill concludes that while “the economic aspect of Revelation’s critique of Roman imperial power is a vital part of the work as a whole,” the early church fathers tended to focus on “other aspects of Roman life, notably idolatry” (259). Christopher Hays examines the theological foundations of compassionate ministry to the poor in the early church through a consideration of the various motives for almsgiving: the extension of charity, the search for community, the practice of self-restraint, the desire for forgiveness, and the avoidance of judgment. In the last chapter, Robert Kitchen provides a description of how a particular Christian community practiced an ascetic approach to stewardship in the fourth century, using Abraham and Zaccheus as their Biblical examples.

This volume constitutes a valuable resource for Christian scholars from all disciplines who are “engaged” in economic analysis in any way.

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