

2-2011

Review of Richard A. Horsley, Covenant Economics

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Recommended Citation

Howell, A. (2011). Review of Richard A. Horsley, Covenant Economics. *Missio Dei: A Journal of Missional Theology and Praxis*, 2 (1). Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.harding.edu/bible-facpub/14>

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RICHARD A. HORSLEY. *Covenant Economics: A Biblical Vision of Justice for All*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. 193 pp. \$25.00.

In his book *Covenant Economics*, Richard Horsley, author of twenty books in the field of New Testament studies, examines how the economic principles of the biblical covenant could apply to US society today. Horsley begins by stating his conviction that the nation's founders desired to set up a society that was rooted in the biblical covenant. Over time, though, an ideology of freedom and individual self-interest pushed the covenant principles to the margins, which then "gave license to entrepreneurs in nascent capitalist enterprises" (xii). Corporations were formed, grew, and began to be treated as entities; eventually they were given stronger "rights" than individuals. Bankruptcy laws meant to protect families experiencing hardship were revised to provide less protection for the family and more protection for the corporation. Recalling the recent economic crises, the author notes that "there are huge government bailouts for corporations, but not for families" (xv). In contrast to living a life defined by the imperial economy, we are reminded that the people of God are called to create covenant communities concerned with economic rights.

Horsley's book, which is divided into two sections, examines the arc of the biblical story through the lens of economics and highlights the interconnectedness of religion, politics, and economics. The first section looks at "Economic Justice and the Common Good" in the Hebrew Scriptures. Horsley moves chronologically, examining Israel's socio-economic situation under the Egyptian imperial economy and the subsequent establishment of a covenantal society, and then considering how that society changed throughout the monarchy and the time of the prophets. He looks carefully at the roots of the Mosaic covenant and how it established "a relationship between the people and Yahweh . . . patterned after international treaties that were also inseparably political-economic-religious, enforced by the gods and ceremonial blessings and curses" (23). Yahweh's ideal is spelled out clearly: families should have a right to their land in order to produce enough to live on, and the poor should be protected. Ultimately, "in Israel's Covenant the society or body politic . . . is charged with responsibility for guaranteeing the economic rights of the members of the society to an adequate living" (48–49).

In the second section, Horsley examines "The Renewal of Covenantal Community" in the ministry of Jesus and the Apostles. Horsley examines how Mark and Matthew use insights from the Qumran community to contextualize Jesus' call for the renewal of the covenant. He carefully explores the economic circumstances of Jesus' day, describing the levels of economic exploitation—the multiple "layers of rulers simultaneously making demands on [the people] for tithes, taxes, and/or tribute" (88). Horsley believes that "Jesus was concerned directly and in a primary way with economic issues" (113) and that "if anything, he intensified the covenantal demands for communal cooperation and mutual aid, to love enemies, do good, and lend liberally, despite or perhaps precisely because of the [economic] pressures" (114). He also looks at how Paul worked to establish Messianic covenantal communities across the Roman Empire.

In his final chapter Horsley looks briefly at some possible applications of the economic dimensions of the biblical covenant to contemporary society. He argues that today's corporations are the new transnational empires, wielding political influence and growing unchecked as they feed off their subjects through powerful marketing tools based on fear and through high interest rates (168–69). And only in the book's final two pages does Horsley offer categories of practices for communities of faith to expand the economic dimension of their witness: (1) serve the community (homeless shelters, food pantries, etc.); (2) speak prophetically against corporate abuses and educate the public; and (3) take economic action as a group against injustice (179–80).

Overall I found his description of the historical situation of the New Testament to be helpful, but some of his assumptions about the make-up of the early church were puzzling. He assumes, for example, that only poor people were among Jesus' early followers, ignoring references in the biblical text to wealthy supporters of Christ's ministry. He says that "virtually all of those who joined the assemblies of Christ, including both slaves and those who may have been heads of households, thus would have lived around the subsistence level. There is simply no evidence that any were wealthy" (139). Then later he says that "the picture in the book of Acts of a few well-off members is historically unreliable" (142). His decision not to see any wealthy people in the early Messianic communities is problematic, because it limits who then belongs to the covenant community. Assuming that all of the early church was exclusively poor distorts the picture of the early church and keeps us from appreciating and realizing the kind of transformative and inclusive covenant community that God desires—where both rich and poor love and bless each other.

Horsley's examination of the economic situation of Israel and the early church is enlightening, but my major critique of his book is that he ignores a biblical text, the book of Revelation, that could have strengthened his case for the impact of covenant economics on faith communities. It would have been helpful to see how the Christian communities after Jesus and Paul tried to apply the covenant ideals in their urban environments. Those communities were clearly being squeezed by an imperial economic superpower, and that text could provide valuable insight for his final chapter, where he looks quickly at how communities of faith today can position themselves as a godly alternative to the political-economic powers. While I believe that Horsley could have made a stronger case for an economic vision of justice throughout the whole biblical text, I would still recommend this book as a valuable resource for those who are interested in the economic situation of Israel and the early church and how those faith communities tried to respond to the economic systems of their day in godly ways.

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