

## A TEXT FOR OUR TIMES? : AN ANCIENT PALESTINIAN ANSWER TO TIMES OF FINANCIAL CRISIS

How often have you heard that the Bible fails to address the problems of our time, and is a redundant guide for our modern dilemmas? It's a not uncommon argument. But does it really hold water? "Yes", if we are superficial; but "no" if we are prepared to engage with these texts.

Consider the events of the last few weeks. The global financial system is severely compromised, and recession or financial depression appears imminent. What promised safety appears to have crumbled in a mire of self-interest, asset-stripping and basic human greed. It all seems very far from the Palestine of Jesus.

But it is not. William Arnal's *Jesus and the Village Scribes*<sup>1</sup> describes a Palestine which has striking parallels to our own times. A bit of background. In those village economies local landowners and village scribes (the few well enough educated to count and write) made a living, in part, as the banks and credit agents of their time: they lent and advanced loans against the crops of prospects of peasant farmers. It was an old and well-established system. It was however under attack. Roman occupation and developments, in particular, the founding of urban centres, tore apart the fabric of society. As in today's world, there was urban drift, and in that drift, new powerbrokers emerged- an urban elite, far better-heeled than the rural scribes and landowners, whose financial dealings meant the end for traditional estates and ways. Put crudely, the money moved from the country to the city, and so did the opportunities for embryonic banking. Village scribes found that their old employers and agencies were gone: they were bust. They lived in a society with no Centrelink and no safety net. Starvation, poverty and unemployment were imminent. These were wise folk and they wrestled with the question of what to do.

---

<sup>1</sup> Arnal, William E., *Jesus and the Village Scribes: Galilean Conflicts and the Setting of Q*, Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001.

Their answer came not from the grey science of economics, an anachronism to them, but from theology. They encountered a village preacher and prophet called Jesus whose message spoke to their situation and their distress. One of them, let's call him "Matthew", eventually thought that Jesus' answer to his own economic problems were so useful that he wrote them for posterity as part of something he called a Gospel. We find some of those reflections in *Matthew* 6:24-34. The passage starts by drawing a contrast between two people to rely on: God and Mammon. Mammon is outdated for us- ancient Near Eastern deities are no longer our currency. But Mammon stood for money, for economics and economic structures- and Mammon stood also (as we are seeing) for greed. This Jesus, of whom Matthew wrote, put it bluntly: choose God or greed. He then went on to tell both men and women what this meant in terms which spoke to the situations of both.

We must remember that the ancient world did not know gender equality and inclusivism. There was men's business and women's business, and Jesus tells both men and women that they will both be affected, but never be neglected. He gives examples which speak to their particular concerns: men are worried by food production, women by clothing their families. Both men and women are made to realise that in the current climate people do not just lose out financially, but also lose face and status. However they are told that this is a problem because they are relying on greed and money, and worry about the wrong things<sup>2</sup>.

Matthew's message is that the current financial crisis is a call for them to re-adjust their priorities and values, and focus their lives on the things of God. Matthew's Gospel is a reminder to us to do the same- and simply asks us what are we trusting in? Is our trust really on God, or on Mammon, in economics, or greed? And is what we are relying on really reliable<sup>3</sup>?

---

<sup>2</sup> Neyrey, Jerome H., *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew*, Louisville: WJKP, 1998, 177

<sup>3</sup> Consider the following quote from Kaboub, Fadhel, "A Conversation with Alain Parguez", *Oeconomicus* IV (2000),1):

**Oeconomicus:** Is economics an exact science?

**Parguez:** There are no exact sciences. There are more or less exact sciences, and, therefore, there are no exact sciences. So, to answer your question, I would say yes.

He then finishes with a passage which seems unnecessarily pessimistic- just get through the worries of today. Like many of you I have superannuation. I am tempted to think that my future well-being depends on it. My worrying about it does not achieve a single thing, never mind any points on the stock market. Far better to take up Jesus' invitation that we let God take care of us, that we choose Him, and reject Greed, Mammon (and panic). Why worry about things we can do nothing about?

Perhaps we might consider a different metaphor. We often treat spirituality as something like swimming- with us taking lots of action and energy (in my case, usually to sink soon after). Better to think of it as floating, letting God take us where he will<sup>4</sup>.

Matthew, the scribe from the time of crisis, gives us his economic message: trust not just *more*, but *fully, exclusively* in God. It's not sink or swim, but float and win. He asks us: what or whom do we really trust? Times of crisis are times to reflect on our answer to this basic and essential question of faith. Like you, my honest answer is that my trust is often mixed, and thus weak. It needs to change: I need to trust only on God, not Mammon (or super).

Fergus King

Kotara South, NSW

October 2008

---

By saying yes, I don't mean a totalitarian system. But if we reject the assumption that there could be some truth, economics doesn't exist at all. That doesn't mean, of course, that algebra and mathematics are not exact sciences. But, yes there should be some agreement on a unified theory; which, of course, can evolve and must evolve in the course of time. One of the worst mistakes of many economists is that they are fascinated by the postulate that there is an exact science. No! There has been a ceasing change in scientific paradigm, for instance, in physics and in any other kind of scientific field.

Parguez is Professor of Economics at Franche-Comté, Besançon, France. Online at <http://cas.umkc.edu/econ/Oeconomicus/VolumelV/Fall2000/parguez.pdf>.

Accessed 20/10/2008.

<sup>4</sup> Green, Thomas H., *When the Well Runs Dry: Prayer Beyond the Beginnings*, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 1985, 142-65.

(adapted from a sermon preached to the parish Mothers' Union on 13/10/08)