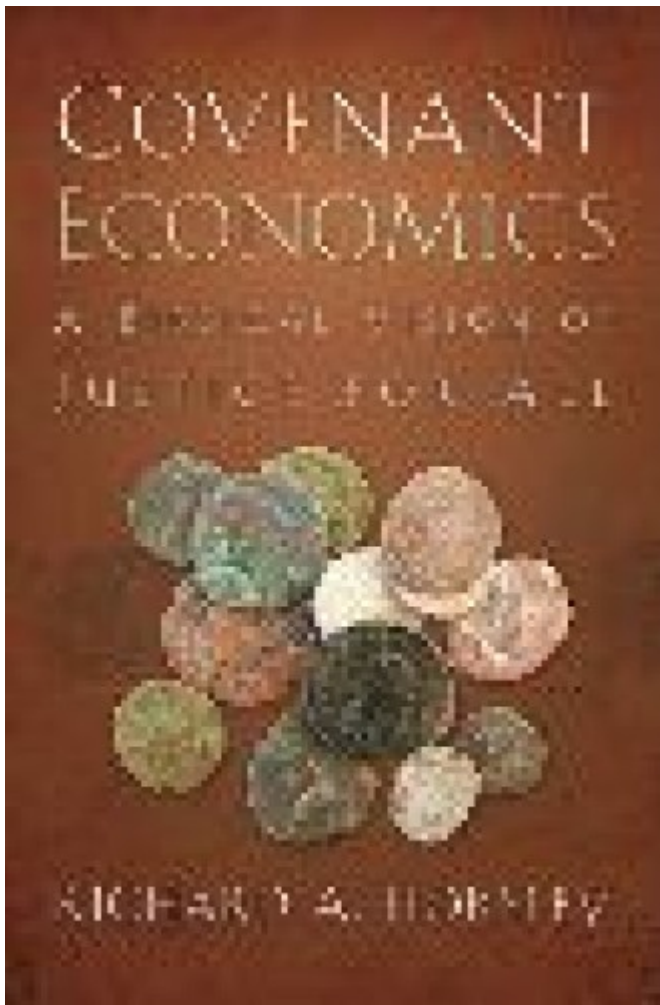


# Covenant Economics: A Biblical Vision of Justice for All

reviewed by [James Halteman](#) in the [December 15, 2009](#) issue

## In Review



## Covenant Economics: A Biblical Vision of Justice for All

Richard A. Horsley

Westminster John Knox

The overarching theme of the biblical story is economic justice for all, and a society can achieve that justice only if it follows the principles of the Mosaic covenant. Richard Horsley makes this claim, then proceeds to show how the Pentateuch, the prophets, the Gospels of Mark and Matthew and the letters of Paul support the theme. The book is rich in economic history, it engages the reader, and it is convincing because of its scholarly yet accessible style. Horsley falters only in the last chapter when he attempts to make applications to modern-day economics.

In order to accurately read the biblical texts, it is important to understand the social structure and institutions of the ancient world. Horsley shows that nearly all premodern societies were hierarchical, with a few elites ruling the masses. The rulers were usually deified and lavishly displayed their privilege with resources extracted from the working poor, who labored as slaves in the agricultural sector. Production was determined by nature, and there was no prospect for surplus or growth except by conquest of foreign city-states in the region. These military adventures required resources drained from the peasant farmers. Destitution and starvation were often the lot of large portions of the population. The Hebrews in Egypt were relegated to this slave existence until their escape under Moses. In the desert, Yahweh gave to Moses a new covenant that promised deliverance from this arduous life and offered economic justice for all.

Horsley traces the conditions of the covenant and its new social structure. No kings or ruling elites were permitted to drain resources from the workers, and a system of mutual-aid institutions was created to ensure against abject poverty. Yahweh owned the land, on which the people had ancestral usufruct rights. Justice meant equality at subsistence because production over time did not allow for concentrations of wealth. Gleaning, debt forgiveness and the return of mortgaged land are a few examples of the safeguards against entrenched poverty for those who fell on hard times. Protecting the poor became the foundation of Yahweh's covenant with the people.

Because the Hebrews felt threatened by hostile neighbors and feared enslavement, they sought a king and a military force for protection. Their rejection of Yahweh's ideal led to a monarchy that followed the practices of neighboring city-states. The covenant principles were violated, and the people were relegated to slavelike status. The prophets preached against these abuses, some hoping that good kings could make the hierarchical system work and others, like Jeremiah, condemning the entire system of monarchical rule. The institution of the Temple economy had crept into the

social structure, with its priestly aristocracy becoming part of the elite that drained resources from the laboring poor and aligning with the rulers who eventually conquered Palestine and dominated the people.

In the time of Jesus, increased tribute and continuing tithes and taxes from the religious and secular rulers kept the people in perpetual poverty. It is against this backdrop that Horsley interprets the New Testament texts. Horsley shows that in his teachings Jesus sought to revive the covenant practices. Passages about the coming kingdom and the verse about forgiveness of debt in the Lord's Prayer are covenantal statements. Rather than spiritualizing the Sermon on the Mount, Horsley asserts that its teachings are relevant to covenant economic practices. Horsley makes a persuasive case for the covenant's protection of the poor.

The book does have some shortcomings. First, Horsley is so committed to reading scripture through this economic-covenant lens that he shortchanges some other themes in scripture. He downplays as misinterpretations spiritual understandings of references to eternity and to a coming kingdom of God beyond the temporal world.

Second, there is little recognition that a monarchial structure in that time could protect the poor. He makes no mention of the kings whom the Bible labels as good, reformist rulers who did what was right in the sight of the Lord. Throughout the book there is ambiguity regarding how much decentralization of political power is required for authentic covenant principles to work.

Third, Horsley does not make it clear whether countercultural communities of faith that practice mutual aid are expected to reform secular society or simply to provide an ongoing parallel alternative for those who come to faith.

Fourth, Horsley's attempt to relate ancient social structures to current ones falls far short of a credible analysis of present-day economics. (To his credit, he does offer the disclaimer that he is not trained in economics, and he invites more discussion on the topic.) Horsley's thesis that modern corporations are exploitative by design and that they exercise almost total power over consumers in a manner similar to the destructive practices of ancient monarchs is problematic. He expresses little concern about the coercive taxing and military power of governments today and fails to address the efficacy of governmental social welfare programs designed to help the poor.

Finally, in his brief effort to blend covenant principles with Enlightenment ideas of life, liberty and happiness, he confuses interdependent shalom with independent pleasure-seeking.

Despite these shortcomings, this is a significant work that offers important insights into God's intentions for his people.