

The Rev. Joyce Matthews
 Rector's Forum
 November 12, 2017
 Money and Possessions
 Chapter 5 - Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah

EMPIRE AND EXTRACTION

The Bible grew out of the context of economies of extraction –systems in which powerful people extract their wealth from vulnerable people, or a policy to extract economic resources from the vulnerable for the enrichment of the powerful.

The Persian period was the time when ancient Persians were in power throughout the near east.

The key to understanding Persian governance with reference to money and possession is that Persian interest in Judea and Israel was as a tax collecting agency that secured income from the province to the benefit of the core government.

The work of extraction was not accomplished by direct intervention but by the appointment of locals who could function as governors and oversee the tax-collecting enterprise.

While the Israelites were in exile in Babylon, the Babylonian empire was defeated by the Persians under the leadership of King Cyrus of Persia. In 538 Cyrus gave the Judean exiles permission to return to Jerusalem and reconstruct their Temple. They returned to what was now a Persian province.

The Post exilic period is also known as the Persian period.

The key to understanding Persian governance with reference to money and possessions is that Persian interest in Judea/Israel was as a tax –collecting agency that secured income from the province to the benefit of the core government. The work of extraction was not accomplished by direct intervention but by the appointment of locals who could function as governors and oversee the tax-collection.

The locals achieved a privileged and preferential status in the community by their capacity to receive favor from the empire by effective tax-collection.

First and Second Chronicles provides a second account of the history of Israel. The first account was from Genesis -2 Kings First Chronicles actually begins with Adam and it goes through 1 and 2 Chronicles up to Babylonian exile. First and second Chronicles is an imaginative concept that must have served to sustain a Jewish population that had lost its political identity, Second Chronicles ends with King Cyrus asking for volunteers to return to Jerusalem to build a house of God.

The book of Ezra was probably written by Ezra around 450 BC recording events from Babylon to Jerusalem. Ezra follows 2nd Chronicles as a history of Jewish people. Recording their return to the land after the captivity. He may have written 1st and 2nd Chronicles along with Nehemiah and Psalm 119.

Ezra was a Jewish priest and scribe who played an important role in the reform of Judaism in the 4th or 5th century BC. On Ezra's arrival in Jerusalem from Persia, in the seventh year of king Artaxerxes, he set out to take strict measure to secure racial purity and distinctiveness of the Jewish people. Ezra like Ezekiel has been referred to as the Father of Judaism. Ezra and Nehemiah were contemporaries

Nehemiah is the last of the Old Testament historical books.

Nehemiah was one of the most important Jewish leaders of the post-exilic period. The cup-bearer or butler to the Persian king Artaxerxes, he obtained leave to visit Palestine on a mission of help, and, accompanied by an escort provided by the king, arrived in Jerusalem as governor 444BC. He supervised the speedy completion of the rebuilding of the city walls (Nehemiah 2-6)

The Ezra and Nehemiah text is marked by a more realistic portrayal of economic matters in the Persian period.

- 1 The first of 4 concerns that pertain to economic practice: The restoration movement led by Ezra and Nehemiah was greatly supported by the Persian regime. King Artaxerxes gave authorization for expenditure of Imperial money for the rebuilding of Jerusalem.

- His decree included not only royal finance but also full acknowledgement of Ezra's authority and economic protection for the priests, Levites and other temple officials.
 - In addition to the imperial grants, the Persian regime permitted the return and restoration of all valuable temple vessels to Jerusalem, the ones that Nebuchadnezzar had seized from the temple to carry away to Babylon. (2Kings 24:13;25:13-17; Jer 52:17-23)
 - The restoration of temple vessels signaled generosity on the part of the Persians and a readiness to reverse the confiscation policies of Babylon. This was a sign that the Temple would soon be restored and a continuation of YHWH's commitment to Israel and to Jerusalem.
 - The Restoration movement depended on Imperial generosity which was accomplished through extraction.
 - King Cyrus' decree included not only royal finance but acknowledgement of Ezra's authority and economic protection.
2. The second concern that pertains to economic practice: The investment of Persia in the restoration was not generosity for the sake of generosity.
- The local Jewish officials were beholden to Persian authority: more specifically the restored temple establishment functioned as a tax –collecting agency for the empire.
 - In thinking about money and possessions in the Bible, one must not read it in the categories of innocent pietism with a simple rule of “make all you can, save all you can, give all you can:” rather one must attend to macro systems of investment and taxation, of credit and loans.
 - The regular payment of the Jewish province to the Imperial treasury was an expectation that would be honored by local Jewish officials who depended upon Persian authorization and favor. The payment of taxes to Persia was a prerequisite for restoration
 - The exemption from taxation of the temple officials indicates that taxation of others in the community was routine.
 - In Nehemiah 5;4 the king's tax was known to be burdensome: They had to borrow money on their fields and vineyards to pay the king's tax.” The taxation helped to create a disadvantage.

class of the indebted who were in the process of being left behind.

- The pressure of taxation required by the demands of the empire and performed by local officials on behalf of the empire created a burden.
- Ezra wrote 2 prayers:

Ezra 9:7

From the days of our ancestors to this day we have been deep in guilt, and for our iniquities our kings, our priests, and we have been handed over to the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plundering, and to utter shame, as is now the case.

Ezra 9:8

But now for a brief moment favor has been shown by the Lord our God, who has left us a remnant, and given us a stake in his holy place, in order that he may brighten our eyes and grant us a little sustenance in our slavery.

Ezra 9:9

For we are slaves; yet our God has not forsaken us in our slavery, but has extended to us his steadfast love before the kings of Persia, to give us new life to set up the house of our God, to repair its ruins, and to give us a wall in Judea and Jerusalem.

- The Persian Kings, have power over the Israelites: their bodies, and their livestock.
- This is reminiscent of Pharaoh in Genesis 47:13-25 concerning Pharaoh's preemptive food monopoly. The emancipation from Babylon by way of Persian intervention is a like a "second exodus."
- The favoring of some elite Jews an ambiguous affair. On one hand the restoration movement depended on imperial generosity. On the other hand, such imperial favor was accompanied by a carefully executed policy of extraction.

"1 Samuel 8:11-18 anticipated royal extraction in Israel. The experience of Israel from Solomon to Artaxerxes was one of extraction a policy

continued under Roman tax collectors. Solomon gained gold by dealing arms to other nations, compelling cheap labor, and implementing an exorbitant tax system to support his lavish monarchy. The extraction of economic resources from the vulnerable for the enrichment of the powerful is a process that continues unabated. This continues today with the collusion of government and the corporate economy (with the concentrations of immense surplus an enormous impediment to any neighborly possibly.)

He said, ‘These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plough his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day.’ 1Samuel 8:11-18

3. The third concern that pertain to economic practice:

Two steps functioned as resistance to an economy of extraction. Ezra and Nehemiah were known for their harsh action that broke up mixed marriages and that required the expulsion of foreign wives.

a. Ezra 10:3; 11-12

So now let us make a covenant with our God to send away all these wives and their children, according to the counsel of my lord and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law. Now make confession to the Lord the God of your ancestors, and do his will; separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives.’ Then all the assembly answered with a loud voice, ‘It is so; we must do as you have said.

Nehemiah 13:23-27

Mixed Marriages Condemned

In those days also I saw Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab; and half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and they could not speak the language of Judah, but spoke the language of various peoples. And I contended with them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair; and I made them take an oath in the name of God, saying, 'You shall not give your daughters to their sons, or take their daughters for your sons or for yourselves. Did not King Solomon of Israel sin on account of such women? Among the many nations there was no king like him, and he was beloved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel; nevertheless, foreign women made even him to sin. Shall we then listen to you and do all this great evil and act treacherously against our God by marrying foreign women?'

- Samuel Adams suggests that “endogamy, marriage within one’s cultural subset, was to maintain tight control of ancestral property rights.” Especially to families of leadership, among those with considerable wealth. Ezra 9:2
- a. The restoration movement led by Ezra and Nehemiah was greatly supported by the Persian regimes.
 1. King Ataxerxes gave authorization for expenditure of imperial money for the rebuilding of Jerusalem: Ezra 7:21-24
His decree included not only royal finance but full acknowledgement of Ezra’s authority and economic protection for the priests, Levites and others temple officials.
In addition to the imperial grants, the Persian regime permitted the return of the valuable temple vessels to Jerusalem. The vessel Nebuchadnezzar has seized from the temple to carry away to Babylon.(2 Kings 24:13; 25:13-17; Jeremiah 52:17-23)

Ezra 1:7-10;5:13-17;6:5

King Cyrus himself brought out the vessels of the house of the Lord that Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and placed in the house of his gods. King Cyrus of Persia had them released into the charge of Mithredath the treasurer, who counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah. And this was the inventory: gold basins, thirty; silver basins, one thousand; knives, twenty-nine; gold bowls, thirty; other silver bowls, four hundred and ten; other vessels, one thousand; However, King Cyrus of Babylon, in the first year of his reign, made a decree that this house of God

should be rebuilt. Moreover, the gold and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar had taken out of the temple in Jerusalem and had brought into the temple of Babylon, these King Cyrus took out of the temple of Babylon, and they were delivered to a man named Sheshbazzar, whom he had made governor. He said to him, 'Take these vessels; go and put them in the temple in Jerusalem, and let the house of God be rebuilt on its site.' Then this Sheshbazzar came and laid the foundations of the house of God in Jerusalem; and from that time until now it has been under construction, and it is not yet finished." And now, if it seems good to the king, have a search made in the royal archives there in Babylon, to see whether King Cyrus issued a decree for the rebuilding of this house of God in Jerusalem. Let the king send us his pleasure in this matter.' Moreover, let the gold and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took out of the temple in Jerusalem and brought to Babylon, be restored and brought back to the temple in Jerusalem, each to its place; you shall put them in the house of God.'

- The restoration of temple vessels signaled generosity on the part of the Persians and a readiness to be seen as reversing the confiscatory policies of Babylon.
- Shows continuity between the lost temple and the soon to-be-restored temple. Thus a sign of the continuation of YHWH's commitment to Israel and to Jerusalem.

Ezra 10:8

and that if any did not come within three days, by order of the officials and the elders all their property should be forfeited, and they themselves banned from the congregation of the exiles.

Ezra's rigid opposition to intermarriage represents the exilic (Babylonian captivity) community to maintain property for themselves. The harsh expulsion was an effort to keep control of wealth and property to limit the benefits to the Persian, the principal ruler. So, the policies of Ezra and Nehemiah responded to the intention of the Persian policy and practice.

- If they say it is not about the money; it is about the money.

- Today we see Quasi- arranged marriages to ensure legacy families stay
- Ezra and Nehemiah by extraction – expulsion resisted having wealth preempted by outsiders, perhaps even by mixed marriages with well-connected Persian women.

4. The other action of limiting an economy of extraction is embodied in Nehemiah 5.

- The most important text on economics in this literature of the Persian Period begins with a “great outcry.” The same “outcry” sounded at the beginning of the Exodus narrative Exodus 2:23.

Nehemiah Deals with Oppression

Nehemiah 5

Now there was a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish kin. For there were those who said, ‘With our sons and our daughters, we are many; we must get grain, so that we may eat and stay alive.’ There were also those who said, ‘We are having to pledge our fields, our vineyards, and our houses in order to get grain during the famine.’ And there were those who said, ‘we are having to borrow money on our fields and vineyards to pay the king’s tax. Now our flesh is the same as that of our kindred; our children are the same as their children; and yet we are forcing our sons and daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have been ravished; we are powerless, and our fields and vineyards now belong to others.’

I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these complaints. After thinking it over, I brought charges against the nobles and the officials; I said to them, ‘You are all taking interest from your own people.’ And I called a great assembly to deal with them, and said to them, ‘As far as we were able, we have bought back our Jewish kindred who had been sold to other nations; but now you are selling your own kin, who must then be bought back by us!’ They were silent, and could not find a word to say. So I said, ‘the thing that you are doing is not good. Should you not walk in the fear of our God, to prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies? Moreover, I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us stop this taking of interest. Restore to them, this very day, their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, and their houses, and the interest on money, grain, wine, and oil that you have been exacting from them.’ Then they said, ‘we will

restore everything and demand nothing more from them. We will do as you say.' And I called the priests, and made them take an oath to do as they had promised. I also shook out the fold of my garment and said, 'so may God shake out everyone from house and from property who does not perform this promise. Thus may they be shaken out and emptied.' And all the assembly said, 'Amen', and praised the Lord. And the people did as they had promised.

The Generosity of Nehemiah

Moreover, from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year to the thirty-second year of King Artaxerxes, twelve years, neither I nor my brothers ate the food allowance of the governor. The former governors who were before me laid heavy burdens on the people, and took food and wine from them, besides forty shekels of silver. Even their servants lorded it over the people. But I did not do so, because of the fear of God. Indeed, I devoted myself to the work on this wall, and acquired no land; and all my servants were gathered there for the work. Moreover, there were at my table one hundred and fifty people, Jews and officials, besides those who came to us from the nations around us. Now that which was prepared for one day was one ox and six choice sheep; also fowls were prepared for me, and every ten days skins of wine in abundance; yet with all this I did not demand the food allowance of the governor, because of the heavy burden of labor on the people. Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people.

Exodus 2:23

After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God.

- Only now it is an outcry of Jews against other Jews. With a desperate need for food. (Joseph in Genesis)
- Desperate need is for money in the midst of a food shortage when food prices are high, a need that resulted in debt and mortgages.
- The King's tax, a Persian tax extracted by local Jewish officials in the service of Persia.

- The outcry is not against Persia. It is against Jews who are willing to collude with the policies of extraction at the expense of other vulnerable Jews (Joseph/Pharaoh)
- The situation caused economic despair and helplessness, with peasant Jews reduced to desperate need by taxes and mortgage rates. Roland Boer identifies debt as “an extractive economic device” that increases the wealth of the leader in three ways.
 - a. It forces laborers into debt slavery or “indentured labor.”
 - b. It ensures “that the flow of wealth runs from debtor to lender, which was initially the state and temple, but soon included landlords.
 - c. Debt functions to ensure and reinforce the hierarchy “between landlord and peasant, between palatine or temple estate and laborer. In other words , debt is a feature of class difference and often class conflict.
- In the case of exodus memory, the outcry of the slaves evoked a response from YHWH. Here it evokes a response from Nehemiah on behalf of Persia.
- Nehemiah issues an indictment against his fellow Jews for charging interest on loans on their own people, other Jews.
- Nehemiah not only reprimanded his colleagues and servants he included himself.
- The restoration included three money crops: grain, wine, and oil.
- The drama culminates in an oath to adhere to an alternative economic practice that acknowledges others in the economy as legitimate neighbors and not simply as targets of exploitation.
- The narrative ends with acceptance of the assembly and praise to YHWH, the God of no interest (v. 13)

Nehemiah 5:13

I also shook out the fold of my garment and said, 'so may God shake out everyone from house and from property who does not perform this promise. Thus may they be shaken out and emptied.' And all the assembly said, 'Amen', and praised the Lord. And the people did as they had promised.

In summary money and possessions must be to the common good in a way that contradicts the easy practice of acquisition by way of exploitative debt. Walter

The Hebrew Scriptures provide God's people today with a framework for thinking honestly and faithfully about economic issues.

Brueggemann cited three case studies in the Old Testament that demonstrated how the economy of extraction led to neighborly alternative visions.

1. Pharaoh. Egyptian oppression of the Hebrews began when Joseph interpreted Pharaoh's dream, which was a "nightmare of scarcity," and that led to a policy of property confiscation, a food monopoly and slavery, he noted.

"It is so ironic that people with the most have the greatest anxiety about running out and not having enough," he said.

Brueggemann interpreted the Exodus as a critical response to an extraction economy.

"It's a map of social analysis" and a critical critique of any extraction economy, he said, applying it to "the oligarchy in which we live that is busy extracting wealth from vulnerable people by taxes and mortgage and interest and debt regulation and low wages."

The Exodus involved the people of Israel leaving Egypt to go into the wilderness—"territory beyond the reach of Pharaoh"—where they saw no viable means of life support, he noted. However, the miraculous provision of manna, quail and water showed how "the wilderness turns out to be a place of abundance," he said.

"This is the core claim of the gospel, that as long as we live in the extractive economy of Pharaoh, we will live in an economy of anxious scarcity," he said. "Whenever we have courage and freedom to imagine ourselves outside the Pharaoh's domain, we discover it is a zone of abundance where the great God governs."

Brueggemann also interpreted the Ten Commandments as rules for living outside the domain of Pharaoh and his economy. He particularly singled out the command to observe Sabbath and the command forbidding covetousness of anything belonging to a neighbor.

“The extraction economy wants us to be endlessly busy, because busy people do not have the time to reflect,” he said. “The extraction economy covets everything from everybody.”

2. Solomon. Solomon gained gold by dealing arms to other nations, compelling cheap labor and implementing an exorbitant tax system to support his lavish monarchy, Brueggemann said.

“Solomon was a big extractor,” he said, comparing Solomon’s temple to Trump Tower in terms of its significance as a symbol of personal wealth.

However, the injustice perpetrated by the small, wealthy cluster of leaders in Jewish society led to a tax revolt after Solomon’s death, he noted.

Eventually, it led to Old Testament prophets who pronounced judgment on an unsustainable economic system and presented an alternative vision—a message relevant to the United States today, Brueggemann said.

“We are now facing up to the first hints that the extraction system in the United States is no longer sustainable,” he said.

3. Persian empire. Persia extracted taxes from the Jews and used their countrymen as the means of extraction.

“The purpose of every empire is to collect revenue,” he said. “The way it worked is that the Persian empire hired local Jews to collect taxes from other Jews to send to Persia.”

The prayer of Ezra recorded in Nehemiah ends on a note of great distress caused by the extraction system, Brueggemann noted. Eventually, Nehemiah compelled the tax-collecting Jews and the tax-paying Jews into a covenant to remember they were Jews.

Neighborly alternatives to the extraction economy

Scripture offers an extended report on extraction economies and proposals for alternatives, Brueggemann said.

“Marvel at what has been entrusted to us—how hard it is and how wonderful it is,” he said. “What has been entrusted to us is the vision, the opportunity and the vocation that the neighborhood can be organized differently.”

In contrast to the normative extraction economy so prevalent in the world, God's people are summoned to seek and to exercise alternatives based on grace and gratitude, he asserted.

"The normative economy is to be resentful if anybody gets something for nothing," he said. "In the alternative neighborhood economy, we understand what we have is a gift that is properly shared. It is a dangerous, subversive alternative, and it is the truth of our life."

"God remembers. He has not forgotten who we are," Brueggemann said. Because humanity is made of dust but carrying God's image, God gives his people norms by which they should live.

"The commandments are the path to life," he said. "They remind us we are penultimate, and we need to get in sync with the Ultimate. The Psalms offer a script for those who reject the foolishness of this world."

