# ***The Economy of the Roman Empire and the Alternative Economy of Jesus***[1]

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## Introduction

The history portrayed by the Bible took place in the midst of the vicissitudes of the empires in the ancient Near East. The rise and fall of empires such as the Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, and the Hellenistic kingdoms was intricately interrelated with the history of Israel, and the Old Testament tells the stories of the life of the Israelite people as it unfolded under the domestic politics which stood in a constant interaction with international affairs. It was then that the Hellenistic Roman empire exerted a formative influence on the history of early Christianity, and thus, on the production of the New Testament.

Economy mattered for the imperial powers. Not only was the military expansion of the Roman empire interlocked with its economic concerns but the politics of the Roman empire were also deeply involved with its economic interest. "In antiquity the political and the economic systems were inseparable."[2] Economy in the Mediterranean ancient societies was in general deeply embedded in the political, social and cultural/religious life.

While the prominence of urbanism in the Hellenistic Roman empire is well-known, it is to be recognized that it was the countryside that constituted its economic backbone. The distinction between the *polis* (the Greek city-state or the Hellenistic cities) and the *chōra* (the countryside) was fundamental in the understanding of ancient Mediterranean societies. The city was the place of "civilization," which etymologically derived from "citification."[3] Almost all of the literary records and architectural achievements were produced in the city. The usual impression of the prominence of urbanism in Mediterranean ancient societies is all the more strengthened by the fact that the earliest surviving Christian documents were written in Greek, that is, the language of civilized cities, and that Christianity spread from city to city in the

[1] This paper, originally titled "The Economy of the Roman Empire and the Alternative Economy in the New Testament," was read for the bible study during the Asian Ecumenical Forum on Life-Giving Agriculture. This forum was sponsored by the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) and the Christian Life-Giving Agriculture Forum in Korea, and was held in Korea from August 25 to 30, 2006.

[2] Halvor Moxnes, *The Economy of the Kingdom: Social Conflict and Economic Relations in Luke's Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 29.

[3] Lynn White, "The expansion of technology 500-1500," in *The Fontana Economic History of Europe*, I. *The Middle Ages*, ed. C. M. Cipolla (London: Fontana, 1972), 144-45. Quoted in S. E. M. De Ste. Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 11.

Hellenistic Roman world. Economically speaking, however, the city was greatly indebted to the countryside for its existence and maintenance. The majority of the population in the Roman empire were the peasants, and the city depended on the rural production of crops, or speaking more accurately, on the surplus of agricultural production, to maintain its urban life of consumption and luxury. Therefore, agriculture emerged as a determinative economic factor which defined the Roman empire as one of the "advanced agrarian societies,"[4] in which the traditional aristocratic and urban hegemony was the norm.[5]

Unlike Paul the apostle who traveled from city to city in the Roman empire and gave birth to the "first urban Christians,"[6] Jesus of Nazareth belonged to the rural area. The synoptic gospels suggest that Jesus lived and worked in the countryside of first-century Palestine for his entire life, except his last days in Jerusalem. Many of the parables and metaphors that Jesus employed in his teaching relate to agriculture[7] and thus reflect its formative influence on his thought world. The fact that "Jesus belonged wholly to the *chōra*, the Jewish countryside of Galilee and Judaea"[8] has two ramifications. One is cultural. Although there is a possibility that Jesus spoke Greek, his language was primarily Aramaic, a local dialect. The social space Jesus inhabited was "almost entirely outside the area of Graeco-Roman civilization proper."[9] The other is economical. As a Roman colony, Palestine experienced the harsh reality of economic exploitation. The agrarian areas were the major victim. It would be proper to assume that as a carpenter by trade, that is, as a rural artisan (Mk 6:3), Jesus, as a member of a village community, had first-hand experience of the ever-worsening economic realities and problems of peasants. Such a socio-historical awareness of the life context of Jesus leads us to cast questions on the economic concerns of Jesus, especially related to the agrarian sectors, which he might have expressed in his teaching and ministry for the sake of the kingdom of God.

This study aims to explore the alternative economy which one can construct from Jesus' economic concerns by placing his words and ministry in the context of the rule of the Roman empire. Firstly, the economic system of the Roman empire will be discussed with the help of a sociological model of "advanced agrarian societies," and special attention will be given to the relationship between the city and the countryside. Secondly, the prominent features

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[4] William R. Herzog II, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 56.
[5] Ibid., 55, 66-73.
[6] Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).
[7] It would suffice here to mention a few examples: the sower (Mk 4:3-9 and parallels), the seed growing secretly (Mk 4:26-29), the mustard seed (Mk 4:30-32 and par.), the wicked tenant farmers (Mk 12:1-11 and par.), the fig tree (Mk 13:28-32 and par.), the lilies and the grass of the field (Mt 6:28-30; Lk 12:27-28), and so on.
[8] De Ste. Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World*, 427.
[9] Ibid.

of what is termed "the moral economy of the peasant," which is the collective response of peasants to urban and imperial domination and exploitation, will be discussed. Finally, against these two conflicting socio-economic scripts which operated in the Roman empire, we will attempt to find a better nuanced understanding of the economic values Jesus associated with the kingdom of God.

**The Economy of the Roman Empire as an Advanced Agrarian Society**

According to a discipline called "macrosociology,"[10] human societies can be classified into several types on the basis of the nature of each society's "subsistence technology."[11] The preindustrial societies have historically appeared in the order of the following five types: "(1) hunting and gathering, (2) simple horticultural, (3) advanced horticultural, (4) simple agrarian, and (5) advanced agrarian."[12] What triggered a transformation of horticultural societies into agrarian ones was the use of the plow in place of the hoe. The substitution of the plow for the hoe ushered in the domestication of animals for agricultural use, which brought about the increase of agricultural production. Thus "the cultivation of the soil could finally yield an economic surplus that was large enough to encourage cultivators to settle in villages, lucrative enough to attract an exploiter class, and significant enough to support urban centers and with them the beginnings of city-states."[13] On the other hand, what distinguished advanced agrarian societies from simple agrarian societies was the use of iron for their tools and weapons instead of the use of bronze and copper. The replacement of softer metals with iron brought about a far greater increase in agricultural production.[14] "Agriculture based on iron tools could produce larger yields, which, in turn, could support larger urban areas with more differentiated bureaucratic functions and an increasing division of labor among artisans in both villages and cities."[15] This technological innovation, however, did not create the immense explosive productivity which would be necessary for modern industrial societies. One of the basic distinctions between the ancient and the modern world draws on the difference between the forces of production. The ancient world, compared with the modern one, was "very undeveloped technologically, and therefore infinitely less productive."[16] Another distinction

[10] Gerhard E. Lenski and Jean Lenski, *Human Societies: An Introduction to Macrosociology* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982). Quoted in Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 56.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid., 58.
[16] De Ste. Croix pays attention to the absence of the wheelbarrow from Greco-Roman antiquity, which might have at least doubled a man's carrying capacity. The wheelbarrow only appeared in Europe in the thirteenth century, while in China it had been invented a thousand years earlier. De Ste. Croix, *The Class*

between agrarian societies and modern industrial societies is that the traditional agrarian societies concentrate on land as the principal means of production. “In various forms, agrarian societies dominated human life from about 3000 B.C.E. to the advent of the Industrial Revolution around 1800 C.E.”[17]

Roughly speaking, a typical social picture of advanced agrarian societies consists of two classes: the haves and the have-nots. The former encompasses the ruler, the ruling aristocratic class, high-level or middle-level retainers,[18] and a few rich merchants. The latter involves peasants, artisans, merchants, low-level retainers, the unclean, the degraded, and the expendable as its lowest members. “Typical ranges for each group are as follows: ruling class, 1 to 2 percent of the population; retainers, 5 to 7 percent; merchants, 5 percent; artisans, 3 to 7 percent; peasants, 70 to 80 percent; unclean and degraded, 5 percent; expendables, 5 to 15 percent.”[19] The percentage of peasants in the entire population is overwhelming. This numerical summary informs us of the basic demographic terrain which serves to explain the internal social relations within ancient societies. Many figures who frequent the parables of Jesus, such as the king, the landlords, the owners of the vineyards, the Pharisees, the stewards, the tax-collectors, the farmers, the day laborers, and the sinners, fit in the social types that find their place somewhere in this summary.

Although the Greco-Roman civilization was essentially urban, the economy of the Roman empire was fundamentally one of an advanced agrarian society. The population of the cities constituted a small minority compared with that of the country. The Greek culture which the cities were eager to adopt was limited to the urban upper class, although it geographically spread into the entire Roman empire. The peasants did not share the citizenship of the cities, yet the burden to buttress the whole edifice of urban civilization rested on the back of the peasantry, the great majority of the population.[20] According to A. H. M. Jones who aptly describes the pattern of the urban-rural relation under the Hellenistic and Roman rule in the Greek East, “The new cities performed no useful economic function . . . The only effect of the foundation of cities was the creation of a wealthy landlord class which gradually stamped out peasant proprietorship. . . . The only function which the cities performed was administrative; they policed and collected the taxes of their territories.”[21] Therefore, despite our impression of

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*Struggle in the Ancient Greek World*, 38.

[17] Herzog, *The Parables as Subversive Speech*, 56.

[18] Retainers can be distinguished as follows: “1) the high level bureaucrats, the possessors of *dignitates*, who were direct players in the political struggle, 2) the scribal *literati*, who were middle level bureaucrats most often in a client relationship with top-level patrons or the ruler, and 3) the *illitterati*, who were menial bureaucrats like jailers, torturers and porters.” Ibid., 59.

[19] Ibid., 58-60.

[20] De Ste. Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World*, 13.

[21] A. H. M. Jones, *Cities of the Eastern Roman Provinces,* 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 293-94. Quoted in De Ste. Croix, Ibid., 19.

prominent urbanism in antiquity, cities, economically speaking, were like small islands colored by Greco-Roman civilization projected on a vast ocean of countries.[22]

A city depended upon its own immediate hinterland as its bread basket. Alexander is said to have argued that "just as a child needs milk . . . so a city without fields and abundant produce from them cannot grow, or maintain a large population."[23] The fundamental relationship between the cities and the countries was characterized by one of exploitation. The powerful people in the cities exploited the people in the countryside and gave little in return. "The cities were . . . economically parasitic on the countryside. Their incomes consisted in the main of the rents drawn by the urban aristocracy from the peasants . . . The splendours of civic life were to a large extent paid for out of [these] rents, and to this extent the villages were impoverished for the benefit of the towns . . . The city magnates came into contact with the villagers in three capacities only, as tax collectors, as policemen, and as landlords."[24] The relations of production in ancient slavery societies were highly imbalanced and exploitative. "The propertied classes in the Greek and Roman world derived their surplus, which freed them from the necessity of taking part in the process of production, not from wage labour, as in capitalist society, but mainly from unfree labour of various kinds."[25] The peasants were different from slaves in their social status, but, as the main cultivators of the land, had to bear the brunt of the insatiable greedy demand of the upper classes.

Under the hegemony of the Roman empire, peasants came to be "more thoroughly and effectively exploited than in most other societies which rely largely upon peasant populations for their food supply."[26] Formerly, peasants used to survive famines better than town-dwellers, because they could hide some of the crop away for themselves to meet the time of starvation. But now the imperial gaze of administrative and bureaucratic supervision no longer allowed such a room for minimum food security. The Roman empire was exceptionally effective in terms of exploitation and control of the countryside. Deprived of the little power they had to hide a small part of their harvest from tax collectors, peasants came to be debased and debilitated even further.[27]

As commercialization and monetization developed in the Roman empire, the life of people in the land deteriorated. The need for currency changed the traditional way of life and

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[22] Ibid., 10-11, 13, 19.
[23] Ibid., 12-13. The primary dependence of the cities on adjacent rural areas was partly due to "the inefficiency and high cost of ancient land transport." At the time, water transport, that is, transport by sea or river, was regarded as a cheaper and easier way despite its inconvenience due to bad weather and unfavorable winds. 11.
[24] A. H. M. Jones, *The Greek City from Alexander to Justinian* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), 268, 287, 295. Quoted by De Ste. Croix, Ibid., 13.
[25] Ibid., 39.
[26] Ibid., 14
[27] Ibid., 11, 14. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 73.

social transaction. Even in the cities, people's life suffered from the effect of monetization. For instance, Apollonius of Tyana, a figure of the late first century, is reported to have found no food on sale in the market except vetches at Aspendus in Pamphylia, which was located on the south coast of Asia Minor. "The citizens were feeding on this and whatever else they could get, for the leading men (the powerful) had shut away all the corn and were keeping it for export."[28] It goes without saying that peasants suffered even more. Before monetization, peasants were expected to pay rents in proportion to a crop, and a recalculation of rents was an option in accordance to changing conditions. After monetization, however, peasants had to pay rents in cash, not in kind. The traditional way of counting rents, calculated in proportion to the amount of the entire harvest, gave in to another way of demanding a fixed monetized sum which regarded the crop as a commodity in a larger economic system. In such circumstances, peasants were easily removed from the land when they failed in paying rents or repaying a loan in cash. "The land so confiscated was then added to the holdings of the elite who provided the loan."[29]

The exploitation was not only financial. The Roman empire exacted menial labour services (Gr. *a[n]ggareia/a[n]ggareuein*).[30] When Simon of Cyrene was forced by the Romans to carry the cross of Jesus to the place of crucifixion, he seems to have been enlisted to meet the demands of the "*a[n]ggareia*."[31] Considering the Markan description of Simon of Cyrene as "coming in from country," it is highly probable that he was a peasant (Mk 15:21).[32]

Along with this economic and physical exploitation, cultural alienation also took place. It is interesting to note that the discriminative dualistic binary between the civilized and the uncivilized, which has been employed to legitimate colonialism in history, traces its origin back to its use by the city-dwellers against the farmers or villagers. The arrogance of the urban upper-class involved disdain for other groups in society, and what Kautsky calls "superstratification"[33] came to operate. "A superstratified society essentially breaks down into two classes of people: a lower class that was 'subservient, docile, submissive, servile, lacking character, spineless, masochistic,' opposed to an upper class that was 'domineering, haughty, proud, arrogant, hard, cruel, sadistic.'"[34] Everything non-Greek came to be seen as inferior. Especially the countryside was the seat of contempt, because most peasants remained illiterate in the Greek and preserved

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[28] A report of Philostratus in the first half of the third century. De Ste. Croix, Ibid., 14.
[29] Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 72. Bureaucratization also developed in order to function either as "tribute-collecting machines" or the bumpers of hostility coming from the grassroot people. 67, 61.
[30] De Ste. Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World*, 14-15.
[31] Ibid., 15. Mark uses the verb "*a[n]ggareuo*," which means to press, force, or compel someone into service (Mk 15:21).
[32] Herman C. Waetjen, *A Reordering of Power: A Socio-Political Reading of Mark's Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 15.
[33] John Kautzky, *The Politics of Aristocratic Empires* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 202-3. Quoted in Herzog, *The Parables as Subversive Speech*, 70.
[34] Ibid.

their native languages and culture. Even some townsmen of low status maintained their own old native tongues. When Paul and Barnabas entered Lystra in Asia Minor and healed a cripple, the people cried out "in the speech of Lycaonia" (Acts 14:11). This dialect was "a vernacular tongue which was never written down and which in due course perished entirely."[35] Lystra was a citizen colony of Roman veterans which Augustus had built. This brief reference to the native dialect witnesses the persistence of traditional language and culture even in a city in the midst of a strong urban drive for Hellenization.

The point at issue is that the exploitative urban-rural economic relations were justified by the oppressive cultural formulation. "Civilized life, of course, was concentrated in the cities; every man who had some intellectual interests . . . lived in a city and could not imagine himself living elsewhere: for him the *geōrgos* or *paganus* [farmer or villager] was an inferior being, half-civilised or uncivilized."[36] The sense of superiority of the city residents and their contempt towards the unsophisticated country people was evinced in a number of cultural phenomena. For instance, marriages between city dwellers and peasants were extremely uncommon. Even in the imagination of the divine sphere, the simple-minded deities were supposed to live in the countryside, while the superior deities in the cities.[37]

**The Main Features of the Moral Economy of the Peasant**

Palestine in the first century was an advanced agrarian society, whether the political form of that society was the client kingdom of Herod Antipas, or the province of Judaea under the colonial administration in collaboration with the hegemony of the priestly elite in Jerusalem.[38] As explained above, the life of peasants in the Roman empire was characterized as "more thoroughly and effectively exploited." [39] A graphic description used to portray the situation of Asian peasants in the modern world would aptly grasp the dilemmas that the peasants in ancient Palestine faced: "There are districts in which the position of the rural population is that of a man standing permanently up to the neck in water, so that even a ripple is sufficient to drown him."[40] The ruling class had no interest in maintaining and developing the rural economic base, or sharing the profits with the producers. Dislocation and ever-growing indebtedness came to threat the life of peasants, who had lost the power of control over their basic food security. In

[35] De Ste. Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World*, 16
[36] M. Rostovtzeff, *Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire*, vol. 1, 2nd ed., rev. P. M. Fraser (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957; first published 1926); 192-93. Quoted in De Ste. Croix, Ibid., 10.
[37] Ibid., 17-18.
[38] Herzog, *The Parables as Subversive Speech*, 73.
[39] De Ste. Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World*, 14.
[40] R. H. Tawndy, *Land and Labor in China* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), 77. Quoted in James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976), 1.

this vein, the parallel petitions for daily bread and for forgiveness of debt in the Lord's Prayer must have struck the heartstrings of the Palestinian audience (Mt 6:11-12).

Social scientists indicate that peasants invented the internal dynamics and value system, which appear in what can be called "the moral economy of the peasant," in order to deal with adverse circumstances.[41] This model is based on the observation of a number of traditional pre-capitalist agrarian societies, and could be fruitfully applied to our understanding of the economic relations in Palestine under the rule of the Roman empire. The moral economy of the peasant is the subsistence-oriented ethic of peasants, as it developed out of the need for a reliable subsistence.[42] This minimalist approach was formed over the long course of experience.[43] The fear of food shortage was a constant anxiety in peasant life. The ruling class did not share the surplus of the production with the producers, and left them only the minimum for survival. When both nature (the vagaries of the weather) and external politics were not reliable, the peasants had to come up with the technical arrangements as well as the social and moral codes within the village life in order to ensure survival.[44] The technical arrangements involved the local tradition of knowledge regarding seed varieties, planting techniques, the discernment of timing, and so on. The social and moral arrangements had to do with a kind of peasant politics which guaranteed the subsistence of village people by means of diverse mechanisms such as communal land and work-sharing. These functioned as kinds of "disguised forms of insurance" or "subsistence insurance."[45]

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[41] Ibid.

[42] The center of gravity for peasant life was anchored in the household and the village. "Economically speaking, the peasant household was both a unit of production and a unit of consumption . . . Every peasant householder had to calculate his needs with great care, if his family was to survive." Herzog, *The Parables as Subversive Speech*, 64. The demands on a peasant's production are as follows: "(1) subsistence needs of peasant family; (2) the reserve of seed required for the next planting, with some food for livestock included; (3) the fund of seeds reserved for barter, to meet the needs of the household; (4) the 'dues fund,' or what Eric Wolf calls the 'ceremonial fund,' from which the peasant contributed to village events and festivities; and (5) the rent and tax fund." Ibid. When the external exactions such as tax and rent pushed too hard, the subsistence level of the peasants became too low. Douglas E. Oakman, *Jesus and the Economic Questions of His Day, Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity,* vol. 8 (Lewiston/Queenston: the Edwin Mellen Press, 1986), 62.

[43] The mindset of the peasants was guided by what anthropologists call "the limited good society." This term indicates a mentality in which "all of the desired things in life such as land, wealth, health, friendship and love, manliness and honor, respect and status, power and influence, security and safety, *exist in finite quantity* and *are always in short supply*, as far as the peasant is concerned. . . . There is *no way directly within peasant power to increase the available quantities.*" G. Foster, "Peasant Society and the Image of Limited Good," *American Anthropologist* 67(1965), 296. This underlying assumption for life frequently led to a defensive strategy towards outsiders. Doubled with the experience of reality in which they gained nothing from their own higher production, this assumption of "limited good" led to the development of a conservative, minimalist, "safety-net-first" principle in the peasantry. For an economy based on land, the main issue was "not so much the expansion of production as the allocation of limited resources," and such an economy "has traditionally resisted attempts at change." Moxnes, *The Economy of the Kingdom*, 77-78.

[44] Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*, 2-3

[45] Ibid., 5.

Among the social and moral arrangements, two socio-economic patterns, that is the expectations of reciprocity and redistribution, are noteworthy.[46] The ancient socioeconomic transactions were characterized by mutual exchange. Reciprocity is basically "a relation *between* two parties,"[47] while redistribution is "a relation *within* a group," which is "found in all centralized groups and societies."[48] On the one hand, reciprocity was expected in village life. There were three kinds of reciprocity. Unbalanced/negative reciprocity marked the brazen-faced attempts of people like landlords to "get something for nothing" from the grassroots people.[49] Balanced reciprocity usually occurred among equals or friends who would repay the goods or the services rendered to them in kind. Immediate and direct expectations of return were presupposed. Generalized reciprocity, as "solidarity extreme," designated the most altruistic form of exchange, and commended generosity, or unconditional hospitality.[50] The actualization of these three different kinds of reciprocity tended to depend on what social space the peasant dealt with. The social space the peasants inhabited can be divided into the five sectors of immediate family, relatives, village, tribal, and intertribal.[51] "Forms of reciprocity used tend to move from generalized via balanced to negative reciprocity, as one moves away from the house-group towards the intertribal sector."[52]

On the other hand, redistribution was closely intertwined with the hierarchical centralizing social institution of patron-client relations[53] as a patron, a chieftain or ruler of a group was supposed to practice balanced or fair redistribution to his clients. In contrast, however, the Roman empire was in general moving towards unbalanced or negative redistribution by its harsh exploitation of the peasant population. The commonality of both balanced and unbalanced redistributions lies in the fact that both practices maintained and ensured the centralization of society based on hierarchy. Generalized redistribution hardly took place in reality, but idealistically it happened when the creditors canceled the debts of the debtors. By the help of these models of socio-economic patterns, one can see that Jesus promoted generalized redistribution, along with generalized reciprocity, as we will explore below.

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[46] Moxnes, *The Economy of the Kingdom*, 34-35.
[47] Ibid., 35.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid., 34.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Ibid., 130.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Palestine was typically a hierarchical society, and Moxnes divides it into seven formative groups as follows. "1. The emperor 2. Rulers in Palestine and Syria: (A) Roman consuls/procurator. (B) Tetrarchs (Herodian "kings") 3. High priests, Jerusalem aristocracy, large landowners 4. The subordinates of (2) and (3): officers and officials, agents in local areas of Palestine 5.Village leaders: Rich farmers, synagogue leaders, Pharisees 6. Peasants, "full" members of the village 7. Village "outsiders": Deviants, unclean, sinners, tax collectors, needy." Ibid., *The Economy of the Kingdom*, 73.

**The Alternative Economy in the Reign of God**

When we consider the economic realities of first-century Palestine as described above, we can attain a multi-dimensional understanding of certain economic values and nuances that Jesus associated with the reign of God. First of all, Jesus denounced the exploitative system of the Roman empire which perpetuated unbalanced or negative redistribution. In this kind of economic paradigm, the economic benefits and surplus increased one-sidedly for the sake of those who already have. Jesus cast a critical eye on the fact that "to those who have, more will be given; and from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away" (Mk 4:25).[54] This kind of economic system ruins the constructive interdependence of the members of society and taints the quality of human relationship. The parable of "a rich man and Lazarus" (Lk 16:19-31) illustrates the dehumanizing gap that existed between the haves and the have-nots in the first-century Palestine. While Lazarus was dehumanized by hunger, illness, and homelessness, the rich man was all the more dehumanized by enjoying daily conspicuous consumption in front of a poor man, lying at his gate, covered with sores. The exploitative economic system gives rise to ever-growing injustice in society, destroys human relationships, and dehumanizes both the oppressor and the oppressed.

Secondly, Jesus emphasized God as the only patron by teaching that "you cannot serve God and Mammon" (Lk 16:13). When Jesus cast God and Mammon in polarity, he presented two masters as two competing patrons. Wealth is not only the material resource which should be subject to faithful use by economic agents, but also by another actual patron who subjugates such agents. It is a personified power like an idol, which challenges the lordship of God. As the true and ultimate patron, God opposes the rule of Mammon which manifests itself in unbalanced redistribution and unbalanced reciprocity,

God is also the subversive patron who demolishes the patronage itself by decentralization. The institution of patronage offered balanced redistribution, which was far better than an unbalanced one for the life of peasants, yet it consolidated the concentration of economic goods and power in the central institutions such as cities, the temple, and imperial treasury. Centralization went together with urban-centrism and discrimination against the lowest people. Jesus' parables are frequented by the stories which value these people the most and thus hold a decentralizing effect (Mt 25:31-46; Lk 10:25-37). God as the ultimate patron does not intend to subjugate people to the hierarchical institution of patronage which even peasants take for granted. Rather, God performs radical redistribution, so that resources might flow from the rich to the needy, from the center to the margin. Both the *Magnificat* and the Sermon on the

[54] Oakman, *Jesus and the Economic Questions*, 148.

Plain have in common the theme of God's preferential option for the poor, which means radical redistribution through reversal (Lk 1:51-53; 6:20-26; cf. 4:18-19; 19:1-10).

One of the bedrocks which served to maintain the centralized economy in the Roman empire was the accumulation of debt. In this regard, a number of references Jesus made about the release from debt also move towards decentralization (Mt 18:12-35; Lk 7:41-43; 11:4b). In the parable of the dishonest steward, Jesus commends his generous forgiveness of debt (Lk 16:1-13).[55] The cancellation of debt offers a good example of what generalized redistribution is about.

Finally, Jesus prized generalized reciprocity. Along with generalized redistribution, it is like a "pure gift" with "no strings attached."[56] Generalized reciprocity signifies unconditional hospitality which gives without expecting anything in return.[57] Balanced reciprocity took place among equals, and offered the horizontal support network. However, the marginalized in the village were not allowed to take part in such mutual interdependence. While the village community of the peasants discriminated against the unclean and sinners on the basis of the purity law, Jesus wanted to abolish the boundary which created the marginalized and the excluded. The divine economy includes the sick, impure, sinners, and tax collectors, that is, the outsiders excluded from the village economy (Lk 4:18-19; 7:22; 14:13, 21; 16:20-21). In this way, the practice of generalized reciprocity proves to be all the more radically democratizing and horizontal, because the vision of equality inherent in the moral economy of the peasant is to be applied even to outsiders.

The ethos of boundary-breaking inclusion and radically universal horizons is also revealed in Jesus' instruction to give alms (Lk 11:41; 12:33; cf. 18:22) and lend "expecting nothing in return" (Lk 6:35). In giving a banquet, one is not to invite friends or brothers or relatives or rich neighbors, who would repay, but to invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind, who cannot repay (Lk 14:12-13). The point is about radical hospitality, or extreme generosity, which goes beyond the norm of balanced reciprocity itself. One's relation to possessions and how to deal with them reflects one's relation to God. The guiding principle in one's economic conduct is God's mercy or compassion. Because of God's boundless compassion, God is kind even "to the ungrateful and the wicked" (Lk 6:35). Therefore Jesus' disciples, who are called to resemble God, should be merciful beyond the zone of safe and stable recompense, just as God is unconditionally merciful (Lk 6:26; cf. 10:29-37).

This final point reveals Jesus' ultimate demand for the formation of new human relationships. On the one hand, the horizon of generalized reciprocity does not endorse the

[55] Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 14. Oakman, Ibid., 151.
[56] J. R. Gregory, "Image of Limited Good, or Expectation of Reciprocity?" *Current Anthropology* 16 (1975), 85. Quoted in Oakman, Ibid., 152.
[57] Ibid., 215.

closed ideal of self-sufficiency and insensitive ego-centrism that the well-to-do pursue. According to the parable of the rich fool, a wealthy landowner had an abundant crop which exceeded the space limit of his barns (Lk 12:16-20). He revealed his desire for self-sufficiency and an attitude of *carpe diem*, as he said to himself "I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry'" (Lk 12:18-19). In his mindset, there was no room for the relationship with the producers of the surplus or the lowly people in the village who had to struggle for subsistence.

On the other hand, the ideal of generalized reciprocity gives multiple challenges to the small-scale centralism of peasant politics. First, it requires the nullification of the purity law which excludes the unclean from the village life. Second, Jesus didn't sympathize with the reactive resentment and hostility of the peasants against the haves (Mk 12:1-12). While opposed to the exploitative system, Jesus shared a table fellowship with the tax collectors, the notorious collaborators of the Roman system. "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous" (Mt 5:44-45). It is as if we are called to forgive evil-doers while fighting against evil powers, and to forgive the sinners while staying away from sin. It seems that Jesus invited people from all walks of society to creatively form an interclass of human solidarity in order to respond to the call of the impending reign of God.[58]

All together, the biblical evidence attests that although Jesus did not show a direct interest in forging a concrete program for the redistribution of land *per se*, he wanted to create a new human community with a qualitatively different economic and relational paradigm. "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age – houses, brothers and sisters, mothers, and children, and fields with persecutions – and in the age to come eternal life" (Mk 10:29-30). God's generosity is expressed through the formation of a new family of the kingdom "in this age." God's abundant reward is experienced not so much in the allocation of property to individuals or individual families as in a creation of a human support network and new human relations.[59]

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[58] Jesus' enterprise focused on "the quality of relations between owners and dispossessed" and "a new kind of interdependence." Oakman, Ibid., 148. According to Oakman, Jesus sought "to establish through his ministry truly interclass partnerships -- with the potential to effectively destroy the basis for a class society," and "a new order based upon partnership and interdependence" could be detected in the message and ministry of Jesus. 216.

[59] It is intriguing to note that a father is not acquired again, "perhaps because Jesus intends all to have God as father." Ibid., 143.

**Conclusion**

The economic relations of Palestinian peasant society were dominated by the hegemonic rule of the elite in the Roman empire. Jesus criticized the exploitative pattern of negative redistribution, opposed the hierarchical centralizing arrangements of patronage bound with balanced redistribution, and envisioned a different world of generalized redistribution and decentralization. The alternative economy that Jesus endorsed took side with the moral economy of the peasant, while laying special stress on the importance of generalized reciprocity. It challenged, modified, and deepened the moral vision of the peasants with a radical demand to include the outsiders alienated from the life of the village community itself. Jesus seems to have closely observed the relations of production. The exploitative economic system had brought a curse on human relationships. "It was not so much the curse on the ground that needed lifting; it was the curse on human relationships."[60] The curse, which arises from the exploitative system and centralization of society, feeds on human ego-centrism and insatiable greed. Against the society driven by Mammon, Jesus envisioned human communities based on loving service to the least and the worship of God alone (Mk 10:44; 12:29-31).

For the sake of the alternative economy in the reign of God, a new mindset or spirituality is in order. Human communities in which generalized redistribution and generalized reciprocity would guide people as the fundamental economic principle are inconceivable without forging a qualitatively different mindset or spirituality. "Love for enemies is an ethical corollary of indiscriminate economic exchanges based upon general reciprocity (Mt 5:44=Lk 6:35)"[61] The creativity and courage to imagine a new economic order of the world, equipped with unconditional hospitality based on a profound understanding of the interdependence of the human race, originates from trust in God. This trust effects a freedom from the gripping power of Mammon and the closed competitive worldview, and enables a creativity to strive for life for all. It enables one to see the danger of *homo economicus*, who is enslaved by extreme individualism and insatiable desire for commodities. Jesus emphasizes not only the vision of the radical restoration of human relationality, but also the wisdom that "one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions" (Lk 12:15). While Jesus taught the disciples to pray for their daily bread, he posed a question of priority, asking if life is not "more than food, and the body more than clothing" (Mt 6:25).

The economic values Jesus advocated offer a number of challenging insights to our own contemporary world. Despite a dictum that there is nothing that does not change, the dehumanizing centralistic economic pattern and the rural circumstances in which most farmers

[60] C. C. McCown, *The Genesis of the Social Gospel* (New York: Knopf, 1929), 207. Quoted by Oakman, Ibid., 205.
[61] Ibid., 216.

are survival-oriented still remain the same in general. Industrialization and development in the modern era have not solved the problems of hunger and food insecurity from the global perspective. "Small-scale, diversified, self-reliant, community-based agricultural systems"[62] have been undermined and replaced by export-oriented corporation-run agriculture which argues that industrial agriculture is a far better and more efficient remedy for a hungry world than traditional farming.[63] "Yet all the evidence consistently shows the contrary; industrial farming's so-called efficiencies are sustained only by large government subsidies. And it causes more hunger than it solves."[64] The export-oriented industrial agriculture goes together with the massive use of fossil fuels for transport, packaging, and long-distance preservation. "One-eighth of world oil consumption goes toward transport, with food products accounting for a considerable slice of this."[65] All the gases emitted from this process come to cause climate change.[66] Therefore, it is imperative to move immediately "away from an industrial food system that depends on intensive use of chemicals, water, and fossil fuels toward a localized model based on traditional, ecologically sustainable practices."[67] This measure is urgently necessary to deter climate change. It is also "the best way to ensure food security and food safety, preserve wildlife and other species, maintain biodiversity, and protect our soil, water, and air."[68]

Given such an urgent call for a turning point in agriculture which has to do with the overall transformation of contemporary economic system, the importance of conceiving of and practicing an alternative agriculture becomes more recognizable. I think that Asian Christian subjects of life-giving agriculture are opening up a unique new space in which a number of experiments of both local and global significance intersect. Asian life-giving agriculture attempts to remove the history-old "curse" associated with relationships. The relationships to be healed and restored are multiple. Above all, life-giving agriculture attempts to restore human relationships, as it stands against any oppressive economic system which breaks human relationships,[69] and works for the sake of community-based agricultural systems. The

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[62] John Cavanagh and Jerry Mander, ed., *Alternatives to Economic Globalization: A Better World is Possible* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2004), 209.
[63] Ibid., 210.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid., 220.
[66] Ibid., 218. "Industrial agriculture is responsible for 25 percent of the world's carbon dioxide emission, 60 percent of methane gas emissions, and 80 percent of nitrous oxide – all major gases causing climate change."
[67] Ibid., 220.
[68] Ibid.
[69] The idea of conceiving the contemporary global economic reality in terms of a curse upon human relationships is taken from Oakman. "How can the hyper-exploitative centralism of corporations and governments, the selfishness and greed that infect the hearts of individuals, the staggering levels of indebtedness and the depths of poverty – all compounded by the callous disregard for human life and rampant military expenditures – be counteracted? A curse, to be sure, lies upon human relationships. Perhaps what is not possible for human beings and institutions is somehow possible for God (Mk 10:27)."

community refers to a reliable social space where people's life, or at least their subsistence, is guaranteed. Then, life-giving agriculture seeks to build the right relationship between nature and human, alarmed by the current ecological crises. Furthermore, life-giving agriculture imagines a new relationship between the city and the countryside, a relationship which is not characterized by domination and exploitation, but by mutual appreciation and collaborative coexistence.

Besides, life-giving agriculture evolves itself on the basis of small-scale, diversified, self-reliant local communities in rural areas. Its ramification is significant in that it points to the reversal of centralism. Considering that human civilization has been almost identical with centralizing urbanism, that is, citification, the life-giving agriculture movement, with its base in rural communities, is in a sense one of the experiments of sowing the seeds of a new civilization which is founded on "communities of communities."[70] A paradigm shift operates here, in that it advocates neither a centralizing hierarchy nor an urban-centered, individualistic cosmopolitanism. Furthermore, Asian Christian farmers and activists for life-giving agriculture find themselves in a unique position to enrich their prophetic practice with an Asian cosmological wisdom which respects the inherent values of their agriculture and peasantry in contrast to the traditional Western disdain of ruralness.

The unique new space that Asian Christian life-giving agriculture carves out brings into existence innovative and transformative perspectives which are fraught with creativity. Asian Christian farmers and activists for life-giving agriculture have embarked on the journey of faith in the empire by engaging in the struggle for the restoration of the web of life of human communities and the planet. This crucial struggle, which dreams of and strives for a substantial turning point, could mark a sign of hope for those who yearn for a new beginning.

<Abstract>

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Oakman, *Jesus and the Economic Questions*, 217.

[70] Herman E. Daly and John B. Cobb, Jr. describe the multiple paradigmatic changes that they regard as necessary for the new beginnings of human society, one of which is the change "from cosmopolitanism to communities of communities." Herman E. Daly and John B. Cobb, Jr., *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 176-89.

This study aims to explore the alternative economy which one can construct from Jesus' economic concerns by placing his words and ministry in the context of the rule of the Roman empire. Firstly, the economic system of the Roman empire discussed with the help of a sociological model of "advanced agrarian societies," and special attention will be given to the relationship between the city and the countryside. Secondly, the prominent features of what is termed "the moral economy of the peasant," which is the collective response of peasants to urban and imperial domination and exploitation, discussed. Finally, against these two conflicting socio-economic scripts which operated in the Roman empire, we attempted to find a better nuanced understanding of the economic values Jesus associated with the kingdom of God.

The economic relations of Palestinian peasant society were dominated by the hegemonic rule of the elite in the Roman empire. Jesus criticized the exploitative pattern of negative redistribution, opposed the hierarchical centralizing arrangements of patronage bound with balanced redistribution, and envisioned a different world of generalized redistribution and decentralization. The alternative economy that Jesus endorsed took side with the moral economy of the peasant, while laying special stress on the importance of generalized reciprocity. It challenged, modified, and deepened the moral vision of the peasants with a radical demand to include the outsiders alienated from the life of the village community itself. Jesus seems to have closely observed the relations of production. The exploitative economic system had brought a curse on human relationships

For the sake of the alternative economy in the reign of God, a new mindset or spirituality is in order. Human communities in which generalized redistribution and generalized reciprocity would guide people as the fundamental economic principle are inconceivable without forging a qualitatively different mindset or spirituality.

Key Words

Economy, Roman empire, Jesus, alternative economy, exploitative economic system, life-giving agriculture, peasant, centralization, decentralization, community, agrarian society, mammon, Kingdom of God.