

# **Distributional Implications of Contemporary Judeo-Christian Economics**

Clive Beed, University of Melbourne (Ret.)

Cara Beed, Australian Catholic University (Ret.)

***Abstract:** Distributional issues have re-emerged as an important issue in economics, social science, and philosophy in the last few decades. In the same period, the relevance of derivative Judeo-Christian socio-economic principles to the contemporary world has been (re)asserted, developing an incipient Judeo-Christian economics. Methodologically, this undertaking is comparable to that underlying the evolution of Islamic and other forms of religious economics. The methodology employed in the Judeo-Christian undertaking is described via a worked example. The example shows how normative principles can be derived from Judeo-Christian thought allegedly relevant to shaping the contemporary distribution of wealth and income. The principles are deduced from a particular sub-set of Judeo-Christian source material, and have the effect of generating greater equity in economic distribution. The deductions are briefly compared in the last section with selected ideas canvassed in recent economics' discussion about inequitable distribution concerning appropriate criteria for guiding redistributive policy, ideas of "equal opportunity" versus "equal outcomes", and the relation between distribution and economic growth.*

***Keywords:** Economic Distribution, Wealth, Judeo-Christian, Equality, Opportunity, Outcomes*

## **1. Introduction**

It might seem far-fetched to contemplate ancient revelatory texts as a source of applied derivative principles or intentions for contemporary socio-economic organisation. Most economists might not accept that Judeo-Christian beliefs are intended to relate to economic life today, even though Judeo-Christianity persists as a major belief framework affecting diverse aspects of human behaviour. Nearly a third of world population still claim Judeo-Christian allegiance, Judeo-

Christianity is formally the worldview of a majority of Western population, and monotheism (Judeo-Christianity, Islam and Judaism) is professed by over half the world which proportion is thought to be growing. Practitioners of these religious faiths believe their beliefs are intended to relate to human personal *and* socio-economic life.

Nevertheless, most economists and social scientists eschew presenting religious beliefs in their professional work, perhaps because they believe they are practising science from which metaphysical presuppositions and values should be banished. This occurs although natural scientists are more prone than social scientists to make their religious beliefs explicit in their scientific work (Stark et al., 1996), and particular philosophers of science, like Bhaskar and Trigg, hold to the reliance of science on metaphysical assumptions. Heterodox economists also believe that science is affected by diverse pre-scientific precepts, and that values imbue many aspects of scientific analysis. In both secular orthodox and heterodox economics, however, journals rarely publish papers exploring the economic content and relevance of religious belief (religious economics), and books on the issues are scarcely noticed.

Religious economics of Judeo-Christian and Islamic persuasion starts with the step of interpreting normative principles or intentions from its scriptures and/or theological systems allegedly relevant to socio-economic life in all epochs. Then it proceeds to the empirical part of the exercise by trying to assess how and whether these intentions apply to the real world; comparisons are made between the religious principles and empirical reality. This is the part of the methodological enterprise in which scientific and other methods are used to ascertain the nature of reality. From this stage, religious economics then develops policy proposals that endeavour to apply the religious intentions to reality, and vice versa. Disagreement arises between practitioners of religious economics in all these steps.

Confined to the Judeo-Christian, economists who have applied this methodology in different degree include Hay (1989), Tiemstra et al. (1990), Cramp (1994), Mason (1996), O'Boyle (1998), Hay and Kreider (2001), and Stapleford (2002), while a range of contributors is in Oslington (2003). The relevant fields of intra-Christian discussion include the Associations of Christian Economists of the U. S. and the U. K., specialised (new) journals such as the *Journal of Markets and Morality*, and conferences like the large event at Baylor University (U. S.) in 2002. The contributing economists differ in the extent to which they value the relevance of existing (secular) economics. Some, as per Tiemstra et al., hold it of lesser worth, while others like Stapleford believe more that they are injecting Christian ethics into existing economics than with developing new approaches to economic analysis.

Religious or theological economics has close affinities with social and public theology. This is a sub-set of theology that utilises a methodology analogous to that described above for religious economics. It also seeks to deduce normative themes, intentions, principles, beliefs, tenets, doctrines, ideals, designs, plans, propositions, purposes, aims, ethics and trajectories from Judeo-Christian source literature and derived theological systems, and relate them to contemporary socio-economic life. Examples of modern social theology are Catholic Social Thought, (Catholic-inspired) liberation theology, and Protestant theologians like Wright (1995), Banner (1999), and Forrester (2001). The religious themes emphasised by liberation theology, for instance, relate to creation, liberation, justice and salvation. The purpose of its Biblical and theological analyses is to show that if its interpretations of these themes were to have been practiced by the institutional church and society, inequitable and exploitative structural features of modern societies would not have eventuated, and would not persist if church and society so practiced them.

Given its lack of exposure in the economics literature, Section 2 introduces by way of a worked example, assumptions underlying the methodology employed in religious economics, while Section 3 shows how the methodology is employed and the results it generates. The aim of both

sections is to show how an economist committed to Christian religious economics might deduce a selection of normative intentions or principles from the primary Judeo-Christian source of the Bible. These intentions in the worked example are held to be relevant to moulding the contemporary distribution of wealth and income. The principles relate to criteria for guiding redistributive policy, gauging how the poor might be identified and assisted, assessing the promotion of “equal opportunity” versus “equal outcome”, and considering the relation between distribution and economic growth. As shown in Section 4, these are all ideas being rekindled in the recent revival of interest in distributional issues in secular economics and elsewhere. The paper does not extend to showing how society might work today if the derivative Judeo-Christian social precepts were followed or what policy proposals might encourage the relevant precepts.

## **2. Assumptions for deriving Judeo-Christian principles**

The discussion below is similar methodologically to extracting principles from the early luminaries of economics to ascertain what they meant. Nonetheless, exposing normative precepts from Judeo-Christian sources is an undertaking unfamiliar even to most Christians. Aside from fundamentalists, most Christians do not view the Bible as containing details or blue-prints intended to inform contemporary material life. “Rather”, as the theologian, Rae (2002, p. 6) puts it, “we are seeking from Scripture general principles or norms that govern economic life and can be applied to different economic arrangements”. Intentions and themes contained in the Biblical text are relevant, not the minutiae of detail. The postulates, principles and paradigms emerge from the detail established for particular historico-cultural contexts that therefore have to be examined and interpreted. A variety of these contexts exist in the Bible. In the Old Testament, for example, the themes are revealed by God's actions as in the book of Genesis, by didactic teaching in the Mosaic Law (contained in the Jewish Torah) intended to apply to the original state of Israel, and by the proclamations of the prophets during and after the disintegration of that state. In the New Testament, Jesus' words and actions are the model, and the writings of the apostles reveal how these were applied after Jesus' death. Religious economics and the theologians on whom it

depends hold to a particular overriding assumption affecting all these sources: That consistent relevant normative themes are portrayed through the texts. The economist Christian, Hay (1993, p. 126) expresses it that “the Bible bears witness to a consistent God, and it would indeed be strange if it turned out to be full of contradictions”. For the purpose of the demonstration here, this assumption is accepted, although like all assumptions its validity can be debated.

By means of a specific example, this section discusses further assumptions employed in Judeo-Christian religious economics. Using a particular sub-set of Judeo-Christian source material in the Bible, the example seeks to deduce normative intentions governing the distributional aspect of socio-economic organisation. The source in question is the Old Testament (OT) Mosaic Law. The OT Law is an involved set of rules intended to guide life in the promised land of Israel, but rarely followed. Sections of just three chapters of the thirty-nine in the OT detail most of the Mosaic Law. Although the Law is treated as an entity here, the Book of the Covenant (Ex. 20-23), the Deuteronomic Code (Dt. 4-31), and the Holiness Code (Lev. 17-26) were developed at different times by different authors. No unanimity exists among Biblical scholars about when different components of the Law were developed or redacted, or how the different distributional provisions blend with each other (Hartley, 1992, pp. 430-433; Chirichigno, 1993, pp. 18-29, 186-357; Crusemann, 1996; Tigay, 1996, pp. 466-467; Pleins, 2001, pp. 49-75). Notwithstanding these uncertainties, contemporary academic Biblical commentaries cited below, relating specifically to the OT Law, were used to establish the interpretations here. They are mainly Protestant, except for commentaries of the Jewish Publications Society.

A prior theological question arises for which no answer consensus has been achieved throughout the history of Christianity (Rogerson, 2001): Why should thematic normative intentions embodied in the Mosaic Law be regarded as relevant in any way to contemporary life, even by Christians? The answer the religious economics example outlined below uses serves as another assumption underlying its analysis. The relevance of the Mosaic Law to Christians for contemporary life is

justified by the theologian, Wright (1995, pp. 114, 176; original emphasis) when he asserts that Israel's:

overall social shape, with its legal and institutional structures, ethical norms and values and theological undergirding, thus becomes the model or paradigm *intended* to have a relevance and application beyond the geographical, historical and cultural borders of Israel itself. The particularity of Israel then does not hinder universal application, but serves it ... what God required of Israel as a fully human society is *morally consistent* with what God requires of all human societies.

This answer, an assumption of the analysis below, is similar to the theologian, Stuhlmacher's contention (1986, p. 111) that "the question of the law is the question of the way of life ... revealed and set down by God for Israel and the nations of the world". These views are held despite the immense socio-cultural gulf between ancient Israelite and contemporary society. As indicated above, principles, independent of the particular context of the Biblical text, are sought that fit into the theological framework of Christian belief, such as the themes of creation, fall and judgement (Hay, 1993, p. 126).

This claim further assumes that Jesus Christ in the New Testament (NT) held the intentions of the Mosaic Law to apply in this sense. Jesus' statements in Mt. 5: 17-19, and Lk. 16.17 are often cited to support this contention. In Matthew's version, Jesus is reported as saying, "think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them ...". Most Biblical exegetes can be construed as interpreting Mt. 5:17-19 for the continuing relevance of the Law's intentions, as interpreted by Jesus, to both Christians and the world (e.g., Bruner, 1987; Patte, 1987; Luz, 1989; Gardner, 1991; Hagner, 1993; Hare, 1993; Keener, 1999). Thus, one Catholic commentary on Matthew (Senior, 1998, p. 75) contends that to Jesus the "Jewish law, as definitively taught by Jesus" remains "valid for all time and offering the way of true righteousness before God". Another (Harrington, 1991, pp. 81, 83) suggests that "the Law and

the Prophets remain in force until” the “coming of the Kingdom in its fullness” when heaven and earth pass away, that there is “an organic relation between Jesus’ teaching and the Torah”. What remains eternally valid to the Presbyterian, Long (1997, p. 53), is the “true intent” of the details of the Law as interpreted by Jesus. Thus, “the church is to ask of every piece of the law, ‘What is the will of God that lies behind this commandment, and how may we be obedient to that will?’” Six examples (sometimes described as antitheses) revealing the true intentions of God’s will and greater righteousness are reported of Jesus following the Mt. 5.17-19 texts.

These views hold Jesus as the only authoritative interpreter of the Law. Judeo-Christian religious economics typically adopts this stance. The economist Christian, Hay (1989, pp. 51, 48; original emphasis), giving examples of Jesus as presupposing the Law, puts it that Jesus’ teaching has “definite continuity with the Law”, but that it also expresses “*new* authoritative emphases, not just interpretations”. Another economist Christian, Griffiths, argues (1984, p. 49) that Jesus thought of the OT “law as a divinely given rule of life, which has an enduring validity”.

Religious economists and social theologians make a further assumption. They draw a distinction between the OT intentions promoted by Jesus and those that He did not. For instance, the Mosaic Law accepts the institution of slavery, even though it set striking limits to that institution for its time. Yet, Jesus did not advocate slavery and He barely mentioned it. In the same way, Jesus showed disregard for ritualistic aspects of the OT Law. On the other hand, Jesus is reported as teaching precepts relating to economic distribution consistent with the intentions of those in the Mosaic Law, examined in Section 3. For example, the theologian, Blomberg (1999, p. 145) asserts “there is a clear message in Jesus’ ministry and teaching on meeting the needs of the outcasts and have-nots of this world”. This is taken to be fair warrant by one strain in religious economics that those precepts are meant for believers and for humankind at large. Thus, a separation is drawn by religious economics (and social theology) between socio-economic organisation promoted by the OT Law and Jesus, and structural features described in the Law texts as characteristics of ancient

Israelite society, to features of which the Law's normative precepts were not directed. Examples of the latter include aspects of slavery and patriarchy. Elsewhere in the OT, the Israelites were called periodically to modes of behaviour anathema to Christians, such as massacring heathen peoples who practiced child sacrifice, ritual prostitution and the like. This behaviour is justified outside the regulations of the Law, and therefore is not germane to the argument about the Law below.

Thus, an implicit theological assumption in the discussion above is that the precepts taught by Jesus and embodied in the OT Law are universal and eternal, "embracing the same standard of righteousness for all the nations of the earth as it does for Israel" (Kaiser, 1983, p. 11). In this sense, "the New Testament carried forward the major principles of the Old Testament and intertestamental Judaism" (Blomberg, 1999, p. 242). Normative intentions underlying the socio-economic organisation of Israel are assumed as intended to be "a model of what a redeemed community would look like, living in obedience to God's will" (Wright, 1995, p. 165). Since God seeks to redeem all people, the thematic principles inherent to Israel's organisation are important to this enterprise.

Nevertheless, interpretive problems remain in justifying assumptions underlying religious economics and social theology, as they do with any analytical system, including all forms of secular economics. Few Christians (fundamentalists aside) suggest that deriving Biblically-based principles is straightforward, even though hermeneutic guidelines can be proposed, including for economist Christians (Williams, 1996). Few suppose also that applying any normative Biblical intention to the modern world is unproblematic. Disagreement arises among Christian religious economists (and social theologians) on both the scores of deriving and applying. But this debate does not vitiate the methodology explained here being utilised by religious economics and social theology for seeking out and using the Bible's intentions in the modern world. On the basis of assumptions discussed in this section, the next section examines deductions in principle that might be made from the Mosaic Law concerning economic distribution.

### 3. Economic distributional intentions of the Mosaic Law

If it is the intentions of the Mosaic Law that are relevant to contemporary Christians, the church and secular society, these need to be assessed. Just one example of the general normative intent underlying the Law is discussed below, concerning only its content related to economic distribution. The overall conclusion of the analysis following is that the Law aimed to ensure in perpetuity a relatively equal distribution of wealth- and income-generating potential among the extended families of Israel. How is this conclusion derived?

The main forms of potential to generate increments of wealth and income in the newly-settled rural society of Israel were land and labour. Since ownership of the land remained with God or Yahweh (Lev. 25. 23), reinforcing a principle first established in the book of Genesis, no land could be sold permanently between families. As Wright (1990, p. 63; original emphasis) put it, “Yahweh's ownership of the land is affirmed to ensure the security of *individual families* by preventing permanent alienation of *their land*... The primary feature of this system was preservation of multiple family holdings in relative equality and freedom”. Ensuring the stability of the nation before God was inseparable from maintaining conditions for family economic independence. The aim was a reasonably egalitarian society in which each extended family was guaranteed minimum economic security sufficient to participate in the social and religious life of the community. In terms of economic equity, this egalitarian exemplar was a revolutionary aspect of the Law, both for the time when it was formulated, and for all history since. Nonetheless, by feudal and medieval times throughout the world where Judaism or Christianity had been influential, despite and because of the influence of the institutional church, the Mosaic Law principles had become totally disregarded; landlordism, extremes of land ownership and wealth, and hierarchical distinctions were entrenched endemically.

Ten measures of Table I below were enshrined in the Mosaic Law by which Israel was to strive for a relatively equal family distribution of wealth and income. Measure 1 ensured that on specific equity criteria, the original land holders, or more correctly, trustees of the land, were given their perpetual leases to enjoy their individual usufructs from God on entering the promised land (Num. 26. 52-6; 33. 54. Jos. Chs. 13-21 detail the allotments). There is no strict agreement among Biblical scholars on the precise rendering of the Numbers texts. However, from a consensus of Milgrom (1990), Harrison (1990), Ashley (1993), and Sakenfeld (1995), the area of land allocated to each tribe was proportional to its population, and the location of each tribe's holding was determined by lot. As per Sakenfeld (1995, pp. 144-145), "it seems sensible to suppose that general regions were to be determined by casting lots, while specific borders would be drawn to take account of relative numbers of people".

**Table I: Mosaic Law Measures Encouraging Economic Equality in Ancient Israel**

1. The initial free distribution of land between family units was on specific equity criteria.
2. Anyone could eat/gather free food from others' land any time.
3. A produce tax was available free to the poor every third year.
4. Every seven years, land was to remain fallow, and its produce available freely to the poor.
5. Loans were required to the poor.
6. Limits were placed on the collateral the poor were to offer for a loan.
7. Loans were interest-free to Israelites.
8. The outstanding balance of a loan was cancelled every seven years.
9. Land transfers reverted to original holders every forty-nine years (the Jubilee).
10. Fallback provisions were available to the destitute poor, such as bond-servitude.

Sources: Biblical text: May and Metzger, 1977. Commentaries for *Exodus* : Clements, 1972; Cole, 1973; Childs, 1974; Hyatt, 1980; Davies, 1983; Durham, 1987; Sarna, 1991; Jacob, 1992. *Leviticus* : Noth, 1965; Wenham, 1979; Levine, 1989; Demarest, 1990; Hartley, 1992; Gerstenberger, 1996; Budd, 1996; Rooker, 2000. *Numbers*: Milgrom, 1990;

Harrison, 1990; Ashley, 1993; Sakenfeld, 1995. *Deuteronomy* : Von Rad, 1966; Weinfeld, 1972, 1995; Craigie, 1976; Mayes, 1979; Maxwell, 1987; Cairns, 1992; Hamilton, 1992; Merrill, 1994; Mann, 1995; Tigay, 1996; Wright, 1996; Nelson, 2002.

Once the Israelites had settled on their allotted land, the Mosaic Law recognised that, because of inadequate management, differential land fertility, accidents and death, or other arbitrary circumstances, some families might not be able to maintain economic solvency. No criteria defined these poor, any more than it defined equality, but widows and orphans, and aliens (who had no share in the initial land allotment) were singled out for special help.

Measures 2 to 4 were relatively minor in their wealth and income transfer effects. In measure 2, anyone could go into someone else's vineyard or crop field, and eat as much food as he could then and there. But no food could be taken away (Dt. 23. 24-5). Some commentators suggest this measure related to travellers (e.g., Craigie, 1976, p. 304), but most put no constraint on it. As Tigay (1996, 219) points out, fields were laid out so that people often had to pass through those of others. Similarly, farmers had to leave part of their crops unharvested in the fields for widows etc to gather freely at harvest time (Lev. 19. 9-10; 23. 22; Dt. 24. 19-21). Wright (1996, 261) emphasises the gleanings *belonged* to these poor, who also had to work to gain the free food. Measure 3 made the proceeds of the ten percent produce tax (the tithe) at the end of every third year available to the aliens, orphans and widows. It was available also to its yearly recipients, the Levitical administrators of the Law (Dt. 14. 28-9; 26. 12-3) who had no share in the initial land distribution above. The produce collected in these (third) years might have lasted partially until the next collection (Tigay, 1996, pp. 144, 369). Measure 4 completed the sequence of free food available to the poor. All land was to be left fallow every seventh or sabbath year. The trustee-farmer could eat whatever his land produced in this year, but it was also freely available to the poor, as well as to domestic stock and wild animals (Ex. 23. 11; Lev. 25. 1-7). One suggestion is that individual farmers set their own sabbath year in the earlier Exodus text situation to fit in with

their own cultivation plan. In this case, free food would be available continuously to the poor and wild animals, but by the time of Leviticus this had changed to a uniform year for the whole land (Wright, 1990, pp. 145-146). To calm the Israelites' worry that there would not be enough food for them during this sabbath year, God promised that the produce of the sixth year would be equivalent to three years. This would be enough to last during the sixth year, the seventh, and the eighth while sowing was in progress (Lev. 25. 20-2).

Measures 2 to 4 may not seem to amount to much, guaranteeing regular minimum food for the poor, for some of which they had to work by gathering the food. The effect of the measures on wealth and income transfer from the prosperous to the poor would have been relatively modest. The next five measures, however, imposed more rigorous requirements on the well-off to share their prosperity with the poor.

Measures 5 to 8 list obligations on the well-off lending to the poor (Ex. 22. 25-7; Lev. 25. 35-8; Dt. 15. 1-11, 23. 19-20). The Law was adamant in measure 5 that the Israelites had to be open-handed toward the poor, and "lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be" (Dt. 15. 7-9). There was no discussion in the Law about whether these poor were to be deserving, able-bodied or economically viable; the fact of being poor was enough to warrant help. Nor was there any discussion about the purpose of loans; for instance, no distinction was made between commercial and non-commercial loans.

In Measure 6, strict limits were placed on the collateral the poor were to offer for a loan. For instance, no lender could take necessities of life such as cloaks or millstones as collateral (Ex. 22. 26-7; Dt. 24. 6, 12-13, 17). The aim of the Torah's laws of distraint (taking items as collateral) was to ensure that "the creditor's legitimate right to repayment is subordinated to the survival and dignity of the debtor ... to considerably reduce the creditor's leverage in securing repayment" (Tigay, 1996, p. 223). Measure 7 forbade interest on loans, to a poor person or to any fellow

Israelite, whatever the purpose of the loan (Ex. 22: 25; Lev. 25: 35-7; Dt. 23: 19-20), although interest was allowed on loans to foreigners. The economist Christian, Mason (1987, p. 4) holds that “the zero-interest loan was probably a short-term business loan without collateral to the able-bodied land owner”. He suggests that “it seems rather unlikely that such a loan would have been available to anyone other than an economically viable (propertied) *beth’ab*, since otherwise there would be little means to raise the money to repay it” (a *beth’ab* was the extended family in which most Israelites lived).

Mason’s scriptural citations following do not substantiate these claims. Ex. 22. 25 specified only the interest-free nature of loans, and Lev. 25. 35-7 dealt with the extreme case of an Israelite who could not support himself. He might put up his land as collateral and had to be maintained by a fellow Israelite (Measure 10). Dt. 15. 1-11 provided for sabbatical debt-release and generosity in lending. There is no mention in the Law of whether collateral was required for loans (except for the case of land discussed below), and the sabbatical debt-release implied that obtaining repayments were not uppermost as a motivation for making loans (perhaps not even a consideration). There is no reason in the Law to suppose that economically-dependent Israelite poor, such as hired labourers, orphans, the sick and disabled, would not be eligible for loans, at least as far as Ex. 22. 25 and Dt. 23. 19-20 were concerned.

Relying on the interpretations of Cairns (1992, p. 208), Tigay (1996, p. 145), and Wright (1996, p. 251), the risks of extrapolating beyond the Biblical text can be illustrated by some of Mason’s reconstructions (1987, pp. 4-5). These latter suggest a scenario for a society dominated by secular mores than by the Law’s intentions. The OT says little about the way the Law was actually used, but the *aim* of the Law measures is the prime consideration here. The Law’s specifications give no indication (Mason, 1987, p. 4) that “only rarely would any balance [of a loan] remain unpaid beyond six years” (thereby accounting for the absence of OT comment about loans’ experience). Nor do the specifications suggest that debtors would have difficulty in getting an additional loan if

they were unable to repay it within the seven years, and therefore would be inclined to sell themselves into bond-slavery. Nor do the Law texts suggest a distinction in motivation between “the zero-interest loan” — a “compassionate loan without collateral” — and a loan secured by land or bond-slavery collateral (with Mason suggesting that bond-slavery might have been the preferred option). Mason envisages foreclosure occurring if “repayment of a land-secured loan were not possible” but the Law only distinguished “a loan secured by land collateral” from other loans only as per item 9 discussed below. Temporary land sale was possible (Lev. 25. 35-38), but this was differentiated from the loan provisions in Ex. 22. 25-7 and Dt. 15. 1-11, 23.

Not only were loans interest free, but by Measure 8 in Table I, the outstanding balance of a loan to a fellow-Israelite was to be cancelled every seventh or sabbath year, irrespective of whether the borrower could repay the balance (Dt. 15. 1-4). All commonly used translations of the Bible and most commentaries on Deuteronomy translate Dt. 15. 1-4 in this sense (e.g., *The New International Version* of the Bible, “at the end of every seven years you must cancel debts”). Some commentators (e.g., Wright, 1990, p. 172; 1996, pp. 188, 196) raise the possibility that only the payment due in the seventh year was cancelled. However, Wright (1990, p. 173) concludes that “one cannot finally be dogmatic on this question, and total cancellation of the debt and release of the pledge may not have been impossible”.

The disagreement about one year or permanent debt release can be illustrated. The economist Christian, Beisner (1988, pp. 58-62) holds Dt. 15. 1-2 to mean remission only during the seventh (sabbatical) year. His exegesis depends on the Hebrew word in the text, *shamat*, meaning “to let drop”. Beisner (p. 59) cites one other instance of the use of *shamat* elsewhere in the Mosaic Law, in Exodus 23. 11. By analogy from this text specifying the one year land fallow rest, Beisner contends that *shamat* in Dt. 1-3 means one year. Beisner (p. 60) offers a further use of *shamat* in the OT to bolster his case. The word is used in Jer. 17.4 in an apparently unrelated sense (e.g., the *Revised Standard Version* of the Bible : ‘you shall loosen your hand...’). Beisner's reasoning is that

since Jeremiah used the word metaphorically, and since God promised Israel would be brought back to its country in seventy years (Jer. 29. 10), the use of *shamat* in Jer. 17.4 implied a temporary letting go. Arguments could be made against each of Beisner's contentions, e.g., that *shamat* does not have an absolute etymological meaning in the OT, but means what its grammatical and social context conveys; that the idea of “temporary” extending from one to seventy years is to stretch meaning too far. Emphasising permanent debt release, Mayes (1979) notes the conjunction of Dt. 15. 1-3 with the (permanent) law of release from bond servitude in Dt. 15. 12ff. Blomberg (1999, p. 44) holds that the “Deuteronomy 15 passage does not refer to any point after the seven years at which repayment resumes”. He suggests “the concern that some might not grant a loan to a needy person because the sabbatical year loomed near (15.9) makes little sense if the debt repayment was merely postponed rather than cancelled”. Tigay (1996) points to the consistency of (permanent) debt forgiveness with the general intention of the Torah to maintain families in economic independence, and to parallels in permanent debt remission in other contemporary ancient Near Eastern societies. This latter situation is emphasised also by Hamilton (1992) and Chirichigno (1993). As to the relevance of Ex. 23. 11, Tigay (1996, p. 145) suggests that the common use of the word, *shamat*, “may also imply that the agricultural ‘sabbatical’ ... is to be observed in the same year”, but that “temporary” versus “permanent” cannot be read from that into Dt. 15. 1-2. On the basis of the evidence in favor of permanent debt release, that interpretation is adopted here. This interpretation, assisting to reintegrate people “into the economy as independent, productive members” (Nelson, 2002, p. 192), also seems to accord with the underlying socio-economic purposes of the Law.

In Deuteronomy (15, 7-9), God is described as warning the Israelites not to be hard-hearted in their application of the loan rules that were probably designed to keep land within the extended family groups. The terms of the loans were so generous in Measures 6 to 8 that more appropriately they might be called grants. The emphasis was not so much of a lender profiting from a loan. Instead an opposite motive from personal gain was involved, embodied in the Law — “you shall

love your neighbour as yourself”(Lev. 19.18). The obligation was to help those less fortunate without thought of personal gain.

In Measure 9 of Table I, families who did not prosper after the initial allotment of land, for whatever reason, could temporarily sell all or part of their land in a “distress sale” (Gerstenberger, 1996, p. 381), subject to price rules dependent on the land’s harvests (Lev. 25. 25-8). Thereupon, the temporary buyers derived income from the land’s harvests, and the sellers (if necessary) were to be given work by the more prosperous as hired labourers (Lev. 25. 35 — Measure 10 below). But if the sellers recovered financially after selling, they or their relatives had the right to repurchase their land any time, again according to the price rules. However, land could remain in other ownerships only for a maximum period. The temporary sale of land between families was reassembled without further compensation in Measure 9, to the original land holdings every forty nine years through what was called the Jubilee (Lev. 25. 8-17) — an override to the seven year loan redemptions. The aim of the Jubilee was “to restore the tenure of land to the smaller household units within the ‘kinship group’ ... an attempt to preserve, or periodically to restore, the economic viability and independence of the smaller family-plus-land units” (Wright, 1990, p. 124).

The temporary land sales can be interpreted (Beisner, 1988, p. 63) “as collateral for an emergency loan to provide for a family’s immediate needs”. The lender would work the land and derive the income from it during the term of the loan (up to forty-nine years). According to the price rules, the income derived from the loan of the land would be no more than the proceeds of the loan. When the Jubilee arrived, the collateral land was returned to its original trustee-owner. The income to the lender from using the land during the term of the loan is equivalent to complete repayment by the borrower for the loan, in so far as the borrower lost the use of the land during the term of the loan (Beisner, 1988, p. 63). In the long run, therefore, the relative advantage of the lender in distributional terms would not increase. Nor would the relative disadvantage of the

borrower increase. The relative position over time of borrower vis-a-vis lender would not alter so far as the requirements of the price rules and Jubilee were concerned.

Four features of the Jubilee year emerge: Land holdings reverted to their original trustee holders (Measure 9); land remained fallow (Measure 4); debts were cancelled (Measure 8); and debt-bondsmen were freed (Measure 10). The Jubilee returned to the poor their opportunity to regain economic independence, to make a fresh self-managed/self-owned work start, avoiding the creation of a permanently disadvantaged and dependent caste who did not work. It represented “a serious attempt to maintain the integrity of the socio-economic ground of the nation’s theological identity”, being based “on the importance of preserving the socio-economic viability of the household and, therewith, the stability of the nation’s relationship with God” (Wright, 1990, pp. 125, 127). The Jubilee aimed over the long run to maintain a relatively equal distribution of the major source of capital (land), prevent latifundism, and forestall monopolisation of land and other forms of capital. The economist Christian, Wilson (1997, p. 29) expresses the Jubilee as “not so much a matter of redistribution, but rather one of creating a level playing field for each generation so that material advantages acquired through one generation’s acquisition of wealth are not handed down”.

Fallback provisions afforded additional protection for the poor who could not derive economic independence from the nine measures above. Chief among these (Measure 10 in Table I) was the opportunity noted above to temporarily sell land and be employed as residential labourers (with family) by the better off. They were to have the status of “hired servant” and were not to be treated “with harshness” (Lev. 25. 35-55). Although not detailed here, up to three stages could apply for these particular support provisions (Wright, 1990, pp. 121-123; Chirichigno, 1993, p. 351). The measure is expressed differently in Dt. 15. 12-18 (and, again, in Ex. 21.1-11) that a Hebrew (probably in debt) could be sold to the better-off, the debtor having the option for redemption after six years, or staying permanently with his employer as a “bondman”. Differences between the

Leviticus, Deuteronomy and Exodus expressions of these provisions might reflect the different times and contexts in which the measures were formulated (Hartley, 1994, pp. 431-433).

Alternatively, the laws might refer to different groups of people (Wright, 1990, pp. 249-259), or they might reflect different theological underpinnings but be capable of simultaneous application (Chirichigno, 1993, pp. 354-357). Along different lines, hired laborers (presumably non-residential) had to be paid their wages every day (Lev. 19. 13; Dt. 24. 14-5). God is reported as recognising that hired workers were likely to live from hand to mouth, unlikely to have any surplus to carry over for a longer period.

Thus, ten measures of varying importance in the Mosaic Law assisted the poor, and pushed in the direction of relatively (but not absolutely) egalitarian results in the distribution of wealth and income between extended families. The measures did not imply sharing in precisely equal amounts per family, worker or person, or according to the work or skill contribution of people making up extended family units. Rather, the measures meant sharing according to the needs of the family each worker(s) supported. The needs of differing family situations, and responsibilities (such as religious ones), were recognised. Thus, for single people, like orphans, it meant sharing to meet their particular needs. Had the measures ever been practised fully, a minimum standard of living would have been established for each person, Israelites and resident aliens alike. Opportunity existed for some farmers to prosper more than others, in which differing abilities etc. could be instrumental, but the more prosperous were enjoined as a matter of loyalty to God to siphon a proportion of their extra prosperity in kind and/or work to help the struggling attain reasonable living standards.

In Wright's view (1995, p. 155), "the economic system was geared institutionally and in principle towards the preservation of a broadly based equality and self-sufficiency on the land, and to the protection of the weakest, the poorest and the threatened - and not to the interests of a wealthy, land-owning elite minority". This contention conforms generally to that of a variety of

modern Old Testament scholars, such as Gottwald (1979, p. 389, 495), Albertz (1994, p. 76) and Pleins (2001, pp. 54, 70), although not to all (e.g., Barr, 1999, p. 237).

The aim of the Table I measures was not so much a strict quantitative economic equality as working toward “an egalitarian bias” in the midst of inequality, a socio-economic program labelled “compassionate stewardship” (Mason, 1987, pp. 7, 2, 9). No one criterion can capture all the dimensions of equality that might be conceptualised or measured. Therefore, at any time inequalities would exist, but the measures were intended to mitigate some qualities of existing distributional inequities. Each extended family was meant to remain economically viable, enabled to participate as much as possible in the social and religious life of the society. Preventing debt, “the greatest internal threat to the social foundation of the equality of all the Israelites” (Hartley, 1992, p. 424), received great emphasis.

One feature of the Table I measures not discussed above is that economic blessings of abundance were attached to their obedience. Time and again for each measure, God promised explicitly that society's prosperity would be maximised *only* if all the measures (plus religious regulations not discussed here) were followed. Otherwise, economic and social disaster would ensue. The Catholic economist, Gordon (1989) calls this the OT solution to the economic problem by observance of the Law. Obedience to God and just standards of equity were preconditions for optimising material prosperity. This is a common example of the indissoluble links between the spiritual and material realms of reality in OT (and NT) thought. It underlines the impossibility of “desupernaturalising” Judeo-Christian thinking; in this case, the infeasible idea that the Israelites could succeed without obedience to Yahweh and His directions of how to organise their socio-economic and spiritual life (Milbank, 1990, pp. 112-113).

The measures of Table I demonstrate a “deeply practical mutual responsibility”, a “concern for the poor and needy... the same ideal of equality among God's people, both economically ... and

socially”. This is held to pervade both OT and NT ethics (Wright, 1990, p. 113), and therefore to provide enduring justification for the particular set of principles exposed in Table I. For the illustration here, these principles derive from OT Law-type thinking. In this thinking, “social, economic, and theological realms were ... bound together inextricably, all three having the family as the basic focal point at which the conjunction of the three realms issued in ethical responsibilities and imperatives ..”. (Wright, 1990, p. 104). An indissoluble link is postulated in the OT to have existed between the destruction of the socio-economic/familial structure in Israel between c. 800 to 600 BC, and the disintegration of the nation's relationship with God.

From Table I, normative themes, standards, intentions or norms emerge that the theologians and economist Christians above suggest are reasonable to be regarded as universal and eternal. In this thinking, all societies are expected to apply such principles in their socio-economic life. For instance, Wright claims (1995, p. 210) that “the moral principles of the jubilee” are “universalizable on the basis of the moral consistency of God”. Confidence in deriving the principles is consolidated by a host of less formal exhortations to assist the poor found in the Mosaic Law, but not examined here. Even so, the expression of norms from Biblical measures such as those enshrined in Table I is a matter of interpretation (e.g., Kaiser, 1994). However, Table II below proposes twelve principles that might be derived from the detail of the OT Mosaic Law measures discussed above. Additional themes could also be deduced, and it would be possible to express each of the principles below differently. A case can be made that comparable norms are paralleled elsewhere in the Old Testament, and are reiterated or accepted in the New Testament (Kaiser, 1983; Tiemstra et al., 1990; Birch, 1991; Blank, 1992; Brett, 1992; Sider, 1997; Blomberg, 1999).

Picking up an assumption made in Section 2, it is clear that Jesus advocated greater equity in material distribution (as in Tables I and II), although in each case of His advocacy, Jesus is teaching much more than this. For example, Matthew 19. 21 has Jesus extolling the rich young

man to perfection by selling all he had and giving it to the poor. Of course, Jesus' main message here is not commending enhanced material equity (e.g., Keener, 1999, p. 475; Hare, 1993, p. 227), but it is that advocacy nevertheless. For Luke 18. 22, selling all and giving to the poor is how a person inherits eternal life, or treasure in heaven for Mk. 10. 21. In Lk. 12. 33, Jesus instructs His disciples to "sell your possessions, and give alms". This orientation is apparent also in the case of Zacchaeus, the rich chief tax collector in Lk. 19. 1-10 (Just, 1997, pp. 715-724; Stein, 1992, pp. 465-470). Jesus' emphasis on the need for greater sharing of material goods is also crucial to criteria that will be applied to people for entering the kingdom of God at the Day of Final Judgement (Matt. 25. 31-46). In all these (and other) cases, selling all, and distributing it to the poor point in the direction of greater equality in material distributional outcome than would prevail otherwise.

The principles of Table II are held not only by the Protestant theologians and economists discussed above. They are promoted also by other orthodox traditions of Judeo-Christian belief, such as Catholic Social Thought (CST). CST has always depended more on Roman Catholic church teaching and its magisterium than on direct Biblical interpretation and theology, emphasised by Protestants. However, a lengthy tradition of Papal Encyclicals, Bishops' Statements, and secondary comment by religious and lay Catholics has advocated similar socio-economic equity criteria for contemporary application to those revealed here. One instance is Williams who has long argued for a model of communitarian democratic capitalism. In (1997), he stresses the holistic interplay of social equality, efficiency, personal liberty and community criteria derived from the 1991 papal encyclical on socio-economic ethics, *Centesimus Annus*. The parallels in principle with Mosaic Law socio-economic organisation are clear. They involve upholding a market economy, not as an idol, but including its regulation, a broadening of people's conception of self-interest, the advancement of the poor through voluntary acceptance of regulation, involving job creation, and the redistribution of wealth via taxation. Simons' (1995) review of Catholic Social Thought also points to its affiliation with the Mosaic Law ideal in their

common emphasis on personal freedom, equality of personhood, and devotion to the well-being of others. He suggests that “in recent and current Catholic social teaching, inequality has become *the* social question of the age” (1995, p. 96; original emphasis). Like other strands of Christian thought, of course, unanimity does not exist within Catholic Social Thought about the importance of greater equality in distribution. Thus, Charles (1998, p. 399) contends that “the Christian vision of society is not egalitarian ... that there should be different social classes, and differences of fortune between them, was accepted by the inspired writers of the Old and New Testaments”. However, Charles provides no Biblical exegesis or theological reference other than Papal encyclicals to support his contention, and it is not supported by the analysis of this paper.

Given the detailed exposition for each of the Table I measures above, the derivation of each of the Table II principles below should be clear. For instance, the overall tenor of the ten Table I measures was argued above to be trending in the direction of equality of opportunity and outcome, item 1 of Table II. Since the transposition from Table I to 2 should be self-evident, no further discussion is provided on this matter.

**Table II: Normative Judeo-Christian Socio-economic Principles for Economic Distribution**

1. Distributional encouragement is toward equality of opportunity and outcome among family units.
2. Market processes are to be modified by regulatory constraint.
3. Prevention of poverty takes precedence over relief of poverty or welfare.
4. The poor are to be assisted to economic independence via loans and jobs.
5. The able-bodied poor achieve their socio-economic independence through self-owned jobs.
6. The disabled are to be supported in reasonable life-style, incorporating jobs where appropriate.
7. Poverty is to be eliminated formally and socially, not just by individual voluntary charity.
8. The family is to act as a protective base against its members’ poverty.

9. The private capital of families is protected, subject to all the above principles.
10. Socio-economic principles derive from religious principles.
11. The coterminous application of religious and socio-economic norms is not to be imposed authoritarily, but depends on voluntary personal adoption.
12. Optimal socio-economic development depends on adherence to socio-economic *and* religious principles.

Source: Text and Table I above.

#### **4. Common interests in distribution between Judeo-Christian and secular economics**

This section comments briefly on some intersections between the Biblical thought discussed above and recent secular economics' interest in distribution. Issues of distribution, equity and equality are reasserting themselves in contemporary economics, social science and philosophy, sufficiently to have generated at least one comprehensive overview economics text (Champernowne and Cowell, 1998), and comparable texts in other disciplines (for instance, Marger, 2002). Partly, this is occurring because of the belated recognition that indicators of inequality have been increasing in at least the last few decades between, and in, most countries of the world (for example, Wolff, 1998; Keister, 2000, and Marger, 2002 document recent increasing household wealth inequality in the United States). Even in Western countries generally, there is growing recognition that "programs to assure a modicum of economic security for the poor and to guarantee equality of opportunity for all have faltered in recent years" (Arrow et. al, 2000, p. ix).

It was clear above that stringent regulations were laid down for a relatively egalitarian distribution of wealth and income between extended families in ancient Israel (although they were never followed closely). However, the OT Mosaic Law did not pursue just "equality of opportunity"; it sought equality of outcome as well. This paper is not the place for evaluating these two approaches to equality. Nevertheless, there is growing contemporary recognition that the equal opportunity approach on its own is insufficient; that it can lead to unforeseen inequitable outcomes

(Phillips, 1999, pp. 55- 60), so that equality of outcomes is of more practical significance (e.g., Fleurbaey, 1995).

It is also evident above that the OT normative indicators of equality were directed not just at economic quantities such as wealth and income. They also concerned issues of love and community because the economic measures of equality stemmed from these very phenomena. Surprisingly, these criteria also are being raised in current secular economics discussion of equality. For instance, Hausman (1998, p. 83; and also Hausman and McPherson, 1996, p. 138) justifies equality in part because “inequalities ... place barriers to friendship, community and love”. More comprehensive evidence exists than Hausman (1998, p. 79) cites shows current productivity benefits of greater equality (e.g., Ben-Ner et. al, 1996). Nonetheless, Christians have long emphasised that equality in its various dimensions (such as wealth, achievements, freedoms, rights) is most effectively justified by the holistic approach characteristic of its system of thought, rather than by just focusing on narrowly construed economic factors.

Recent (Protestant) Christian socio-economically-relevant expositions of equality are Hicks (2000), Forrester (2001), and Bauckham (2003). A typical summary of this thinking is that “the overall direction of biblical thought ... is egalitarian”(Bauckham, 2003, p. 118). These writers point to the intrinsic connection between equality and freedom, the compatibility between equality and diversity, and that enhanced outcome equality can lead to increased opportunities and freedom for the majority in society (even if it curtails that of a minority). Christian considerations of equality have typically proceeded in isolation from those in economics, and *vice versa*, but overlaps between their contemporary interests in equality are obvious. For instance, Sen (1999, p. 75) advocates greater opportunities to achieve equality in “a person’s ‘capability’” meaning “the alternative combinations of functionings that are feasible for her to achieve. Capability is thus a kind of freedom: the substantive freedom to achieve alternative functioning combinations (or, less formally put, the freedom to achieve various lifestyles).” Forrester (2001, p. 37) suggests that Sen’s

conception pays insufficient attention to sought outcomes, and therefore is not equivalent to Judeo-Christian conceptions of equality.

Items 1, 2 and 4 of Table II imply that market processes are subject to social control over the distribution of productive assets (in the same way that social constraints were required to effect the constellation of Table I measures). Further, the tenor of Tables I and II is to push toward material equality through control over the distribution of assets more than over the distribution of income. Disparities could remain in income distribution although forces would be operating to diminish them. These tendencies also echo some contemporary secular normative views of distribution. For example, (Miller, 1999, pp. 249-250) suggests that “a just distribution of income would be substantially unequal, but the range of inequality would be considerably smaller than the range that now exists in almost all capitalist economies”. The emphasis on asset distribution, as distinct from income distribution, has also emerged in some recent economics’ discussion. Thus, Bowles and Gintis (1998, p. 10) construct a case that an implementable class of asset distributions exists that is “both more egalitarian and more efficient than the concentrations of asset holding observed in most capitalist economies”.

Again, as in current economics’ discussion, item 4 of Table II does not connote just a non-institutional response to the needs of the less privileged. Formal, direct, social (e.g., governmental) arrangements are consistent with this aim, and item 5 proposes that the poor unemployed are to be provided with productive self-owned and self-managed paid jobs, not workfare-type activities (further explained in Beed and Beed, 2002a and b). The able-bodied poor are to be encouraged into these jobs in viable enterprises paying a living wage. Certainly, interpretive leaps have to be taken to relate some of the principles to the modern world. For instance, the family unit of items 8 and 9 has to be understood in modern terms. The OT extended family in no way serves as the model for today. Protecting the private capital of families (item 9) presupposes the simultaneous pursuit of all other items of the table, so that current inequalities in

the distribution of capital would be reduced. Protection does not mean preservation of the status quo. How any of these principles might be translated into action in any specific context is a matter for debate, in which disagreement exists between Christian social analysts.

There is an underlying inference from Tables I and II that more egalitarian distributions of private financial capital (distinguished from human capital) are more enhancing of socio-economic development than less egalitarian distributions. Some recent economic analysis also trends in this direction. Contrary to conventional economics' thinking (summarised in Champernowne and Cowell, 1998, p. 14), Zucker (2001, pp. 142-146) showed that for sixteen developed countries, no relationship existed between levels of inequality and national savings rates. Persson and Tabellini (1994) examined the relationship between income inequality and economic growth in a number of countries from the 1960s to the mid 80s, finding that greater inequality actually detracted from economic growth. Other studies affirm this tendency. Brandolini and Rossi (1998) concluded that growth in productivity might actually be enhanced by institutions that encouraged equality, while Solimano (1998, p. 53) summarised the thrust of these types of studies as "income inequality deters economic growth". Similarly, an extensive macro empirical exercise concluded "that income inequality has [a] significant negative effect on the growth rate" (Hung Mo, 2000, p. 312). At the micro level, entrepreneurial effort has been argued to be stifled by concentrated distributions of wealth (e.g., Blanchflower and Oswald, 1998; Hoff, 1998).

Reasons comparable to those implicit in the OT provisions can be proposed why these relationships might hold. With greater equality, the rich may be less inclined to avoid taxation through capital flight or evasion. Less evasion may allow either more tax to be collected or tax rates to be reduced, either potentially helping to stimulate economic growth. Higher equality in wealth distribution implies more evenly dispersed educational opportunities important to increasing job take-up and economic growth. With greater equality, there may be more acceptance of existing distribution levels with less political pressure for redistribution, producing greater social

and political stability, and providing safe conditions for investment (Alesina, 1998). Less pressure for redistributive policies could involve lower taxation levels helping to stimulate economic growth. Contrary to a common view, higher equality might even lead to higher savings and investment rates, for the majority of the population would have more opportunity for investing. This might be compared with more unequal societies where the poor, the majority of the population, “cannot borrow to finance even those investments that yield extraordinary returns” (Birdsall et al., 1998, p. 70), a notable phenomenon in less developed countries.

In summary, various commonalities, mentioned cursorily above, seem to exist between Biblical thinking about economic distributional matters and those raised in recent secular economic’ discussions. Each of these common orientations is capable of further dissection. To the extent that the observations in this section are valid, it appears that the ancient wisdom of the Old Testament sought to incorporate, thousands of years ago, a range of policies in principle to operationalise normative precepts affecting economic distribution that secular economics is only recently starting to contemplate.

## **5. Conclusion**

The process illustrated here has been how selected economists and theologians argue from one source of their Christian beliefs to principles for contemporary application governing the distribution of wealth and income. Within the framework of religious economics undergirded by a Christian worldview, the focus has been on the distributional intentions of the Biblical Old Testament Law, assumedly upheld and re-interpreted by Jesus, as one fount of principles for achieving equitable economic distribution. Resting on criteria for pursuing greater equality in distributional outcomes, the impracticability of considering distribution separately from the use of wealth and provision of jobs, and that wealth creation is not given priority over distribution, these emphases parallel issues reasserting themselves in secular economics today.

Comparable emphases are manifest in a variety of contexts in contemporary economic thought. Although not accepted widely in orthodox secular economics, the Judeo-Christian propositions here coincide with those held by some heterodox schools of economic thought, such as Post Keynesianism. Thus, Arestis (1992, pp. 240, 241) proposes that economic policy should seek to “reduce the inequalities that exist in a capitalist system”, that “governments should also strive to promote a more equal distribution of market power and, thus, income and wealth”. As well, secular socio-economic models are starting to be promoted embodying elements of the Judeo-Christian principles of Tables I and II, even including low reliance on interest rates (e.g., Albert and Hahnel, 1991; Hirst, 1994; George, 2002). Finally, the Judeo-Christian economic principles derived from the Biblical analysis of Section 2 show a high degree of conformity with those of modern Islamic economics, such as propounded by Chapra (1992), Choudhury (1992), and Mills and Presley (1999). These diverse contexts suggest that age-old principles attempting to influence the contemporary distribution of wealth and income continue to maintain their relevance.

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