

# Introduction

In Egypt the Hebrews were an economically oppressed people. They lived under hierarchical, racial, and classist violence. As slaves they existed in an economic relationship with the Egyptians, always seeing them through the lens of their separate and subservient lives. A man named Moses, spared from a genocidal-infanticidal campaign of the Pharaoh by the machinations of his mother and the grace of the Pharaoh's daughter, comes to despise Egyptian oppression. Not having been a slave himself but of the aristocracy, he did not live with the fear of repercussions for disobedience or spreading subversion. One day Moses saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave and interceded to the point of killing the Egyptian. His indignation at a system turned to an uncontrollable rage focused on a representative of that system. And so Moses tried the first path of resistance—violence. Moses retreated into a forty-year exile living with remote Midians and building a life there. Called back to his former family and tribe, Moses and his brother Aaron begin the second attempt at resistance and change—nonviolent protest. As the protest is not heard, Moses performs signs and wonders. He does not incite the people to violence or to rise up. These signs and wonders are able to be performed by the Pharaoh's court magicians as well, at least for a time, invoking a cosmic battle to show the supremacy of the Hebrews' God. Which cosmology will prove superior? This is an outright battle, so although there is no direct violence, the battle is located on the spiritual plane with material results.

The Pharaoh's gods prove inferior, and yet he will not relent. Property loss to the extremely wealthy is relatively less catastrophic and, as usual, the owner is able to outlast the slave or striking employees due to accumulated wealth and alternative sources of labor and supply. It is only when the Pharaoh experiences personal and irreplaceable relational loss, with the death of his firstborn son and heir, that he relents to liberate his slaves. This is only

temporary, however. Filled with vengeful wrath he will pursue the Hebrews even to his own destruction. The loss of the source of his wealth is a significant blow to his identity in the eyes of his own people. He is an image of the gods, representing the gods on earth. The cosmic battle he has lost could be the loss of the entire Egyptian cosmos.

As the Hebrews depart Egypt, the Egyptian women give their gold and silver jewelry and clothing to the Hebrew women. The Hebrews do not go away empty from their time in slavery, ending up with worldly riches. But these riches are entirely useless for a long wilderness journey—gold and silver having no use value. Eventually they come to Mount Sinai where, feeling abandoned by Moses and his God, the Hebrews turn to Aaron and create a golden calf out of the plunder of Egypt. Aaron stood up and proclaimed “Behold these are your gods who brought you out of Egypt.”<sup>1</sup> And so the Hebrews were led astray by their own plunder, turning their gold into their gods and believing that they delivered them from Egypt.

This is a hopeful and tragic story all at once. The oppressed Hebrews are released from captivity but so earnestly desire to be mastered that they must create their own gods out of their plundered wealth. But it is not an unusual story. Money transforms those who use it into its own image. The Hebrews so valued their gold that they turned it into a god, a projection of what they thought had saved them. Because value is created in the self and in the community, and this was a wilderness community ostensibly not engaged in any trade or production of its own, the gold was entirely useless. Nevertheless, it was given great value as a representation of divinity. The Hebrews create their own gods and worship them, deceiving only themselves in the process.

Though they did not escape Egypt by violent revolution, nor did they stay in support of the Pharaoh, the Hebrews did not carry through in the plundering of Egypt. For they took away something far more important than treasure, they took away a system of economic value so that the plunder of Egypt ended up corrupting them. This book tells a larger story, and one that does not end so disastrously. The Christian is called to plunder Egypt, not by taking its valuables or inheriting its values, neither affirming Egyptian economics nor rising up in revolutionary violence. The Christian ethic of economics is a third way, obeying the letter of Egyptian law while subverting its economic structures by the love that refuses to acknowledge material wealth as determinative.

1. Exod 32:4.

## Outline

This book tells two stories: the history of human economic relationships, and the story of reconciliation in the Bible. By juxtaposing these stories, we find that the two are profoundly different from the very beginning. The first chapter sets forth that this book is one example of a particular kind of theological method, a method that prioritizes relationships over metaphysics. The second chapter then recounts an anthropological history of economics, dividing human economic history into three kinds of society: premonetary, monetary, and postmonetary. Metaphysics itself is seen to have its genesis in the new invention of coinage in the monetary society. This introduces a difficulty for economic ethics. The Hebrew Scriptures were broadly written in a premonetary society, and the New Testament was written in the monetary society, but we now live in a postmonetary age that has significant differences to these former eras, which makes direct application of economic principles from Scripture problematic.

The third, fourth, and fifth chapters examine the three kinds of relationships that people have with God in the narrative of Scripture: the Creator-creature relationship, estrangement, and the Reconciler-reconciled relationship. Each of these is examined in some detail for their relation to economic concerns. We learn that God is not an economist in his relationships as the Creator, but engages in these relationships for the purpose of subverting them, leading to reconciliation. Estrangement creates new ways of thinking in the absence of a relationship with God. The economic relationship is one major outcome of this estrangement by its transformation of human epistemology.

The sixth and seventh chapters address the application of this theology to a few ethical concerns. Throughout we find that God's mission in reconciliation is a subversive one that is neither a divine "Yes" or a divine "No." It is a divine engagement in human systems for the purpose of liberating individual people from these systems and stories for reconciliation with himself, creating reconciliation with others and his creation, forming a community of the reconciled whose mission it is to continue this work of subverting the stories and values of human *cosmoi*.

## Special Terms

Along the way the reader will encounter a few terms of my own that require a little explanation. The first is *cosmos* and its plural, *cosmoi*. These terms refer to humanly created worlds, acknowledging that, in estrangement from

God there is no one world or creation. Indeed, the creation is marred beyond recognition as such by worlds that people groups create. People do not create one world, our world is continually shifting. We are integrated into a world from birth until death, but it is a world of our construction and a world we are continually constructing. So in order to avoid confusion I speak of a single *cosmos* to mean a humanly created world, often in story form, and its plural *cosmoi* to refer to the many worlds that have been created throughout space and time.

A second term or concept that is important to identify is the economic relationship. “The Economy” is a reification no different than the golden calf of the Hebrews. It is a major construct of the postmonetary age. Instead I refer to economy as a kind of relationship in which personal relationships are mediated through material wealth. In this way we can identify similarities throughout human history, enlightened by the vast differences of human economic expression.

A third term to note is estrangement. In keeping with the prioritization of relationship over metaphysics throughout this work, I do not refer to the event of original sin as *the Fall*, but as *the Estrangement*. For I will argue that humans do not undergo metaphysical transformation but break a relationship with continuing repercussions that are amplified in our own time.

Though this is mainly an academic work I conclude with a call to action. Indeed, this entire book is a call to action and is itself an example of the action of subversion. As Christians, the false dichotomies presented by our cosmos must be rejected, for the cosmos itself must be re-narrated. Thus, the terms of our problems must be challenged and restated. Christ has nothing to offer a preordained economic system, for Jesus came to love individuals, not to offer his own cosmology. And so we see that Christ is the second and better Moses. Moses’s people were led astray by plundering Egypt, exchanging reconciliation with God for slavery to idolatry and the worship of economics. The people of Jesus—not necessarily the actual history of Christianity, but those who follow the living Christ—devalue economic relationships by loving subversion.

The problem of economics for the Christian is eminently theological. A proper theological ethic that addresses economics must engage in a cosmological subversion, for economics lies at the heart of our present relationships with each other, the gods, and the nonhuman world in our very conception of each of these things. If we desire to engage with economics as Christians we must start again at the beginning of a story. In this book we trace two stories, a history of economics and the biblical history with an eye towards economics. We will see that the power of the gospel is not in direct opposition nor in affirmation but in subversion.