

# **Economic Scenarios of the NT Christianity: A Socio-Economic Reading of Luke-Acts**

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**'Money'** is central to human life and survival but it has a more significant place both in the individual and corporate life of the Christians. In this sense, 'money' has an essential function in the ecclesial context. In liturgy and worship, we use the terms 'offerings' and 'tithes', which convey to us not just the sense of money as material substance but a theological connotation as well. The underpinning theological idea is that each Christian ought to give to God thankfully and cheerfully for what one has received from him. Harvest festival represents an agrarian piety of returning back to God some of the produce that God, through earth and other resources of nature, made the harvest possible. During a Sunday worship, thanksgiving offerings are offered at the altar in gratitude for child-birth, deliverance from accidents, restoration from ill-health, passing in examinations, finding a new job, success in business etc. We are often taught that a Christian ought to see this type of Christian stewardship as a symbol of his/her faith upon and obedience to God. Moreover, various appeals have been made to donate money and offerings in kind to some worthy causes particularly to help the poor. They all indicate a particular notion of Christian attitude to money. In this respect, the word 'tithe' carries the maximum appeal to an individual Christian by which one is encouraged to give away one tenth of his/her income to the Church or to evangelistic work or some good Christian causes. Tithing is, therefore, regarded as a highest achievable Christian ideal.

Pastors and preachers motivate people by selecting certain appropriate verses such as 'God loves a cheerful giver', 'It is

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blessed to give than to receive' and texts such as 'the widow's offering of two coins at the temple' etc. To give maximum inducement for 'giving', preachers give the example of Mr. Colgate who is alleged to have tithed regularly to God and because of that God has blessed him. All these represent ideals of stewardship taken over mainly from the OT and often looked upon as a symbol of the personal act of piety in gratitude and self-sacrifice to God. In most occasions, the motive for Christian stewardship is to obtain more and more God's blessing. I am not undermining 'Christian giving' or any of the ecclesiastical ventures of fund-raising for the sake of building Churches and for constructive social causes and programmes. What I plead is that economic ideals that are conveyed through words such as 'offerings', 'tithes' 'donations', 'subscriptions' and 'contributions' and the like, present only one aspect of the Christian life and attitude to money. 'Money' has a deeper significance and far reaching implications to Christian understanding of the gospel and to the mission of the church to-day. The close relationship between economics and the gospel often go unnoticed and are covered under in a so-called pietistic reading of the NT.

### *Methods of Reading*

The failure to catch a glimpse of the inter-connection between money and the gospel is largely due to the way how one reads the NT. If the aim is to merely show that Christian giving is necessary for an individual enhancement of chances of finding favour with God, then there is something wrong with our reading and the interpretation of the Bible. We must distinguish two ways of reading of the Bible: 1. Intra-personal and 2. Inter-personal.

I would like to provide a partial summary of the views of B.J. Malina to help us to understand the distinction between the two.<sup>1</sup> 1) In a process of intra-personal reading, sole attention is paid to the wording and the formation of sentences. The text is treated as consisting of words and sentences. From the analysis of the words and sentences, a set of propositions are extracted which are then made ready for application to the

present world. The propositions are then made to form a theological system a set of truths or ethical ideals. We cannot decontextualise the text so as to focus on some universal and timeless truths of Christian religion to edify an individual or individuals. The intra-personal reading is psychologically motivated and is oriented to reducing the text to create personal remorse for the sins committed and to sustain the joy a man/woman has received in his/her heart in a pursuit of happiness. What this method fails to demonstrate is that the meanings of a text is rooted in a social system in which communication of God's word has taken place.

The inter-personal reading, on the other hand, stresses the need to view the text within its social setting and in the case of NT the social realities of the Eastern Mediterranean world. In the case of Luke-Acts, we need to seek to understand Luke's world and his readers' social setting. To facilitate that understanding, we must know the cultural and historical features of Luke's world. What we are going to consider is some of the scenarios in the economic life of the society in the first century Mediterranean world. We shall side by side see how Luke has interacted with them and how he expects his readers to interact with them. We read the texts for an awareness of the economic problems of the world in which early Christians lived and witnessed to the gospel. In an inter-personal reading, we seek to grasp the economical realities of the first century world in order to ascertain the dynamics of the Christian movement within that matrix. The economic situation within which the early Christians lived shaped, to a large extent, the faith and the mission of the early Church.

### **Economic scenarios: Country-life, City, Regions**

#### *Country-life: Forgiving the debts of the peasants*

The text needs context. We look at the economic scenarios that prevailed and those which the early Church wished to create in various levels such as village life, city life, life-situation between region and region and finally the kerygma of the early Church. First of all, Luke's gospel graphically portrays the realities of peasants' life. D.E. Oakman observes,

First, familiarity with a variety of Palestinian flora and crops is indicated: grain (Lk. 6:1; 8:5-8), weeds (6:44), grapes and wine (5:37-39; 6:44), figs (6: 44; 21:29-31), orchards (6:43), condiments (11:42; 13:19). Second, farm animals ... are sometimes mentioned: sheep or lambs (2:8; 10:3; 15:3-6), swine (8:32; 15:16), a colt (19:30). The tradition is quite familiar with village or agricultural operations and tools: axe (3:9), winnowing fork (3:17), new woven cloth (5:36), ... sowing (8:5). oil lamp (8:16), plow (9:62), ...baking (11:5-6), care of fig trees (13:6-9), use of leaven (13:21)...<sup>2</sup>

There is a penetrating analysis of the socio-economic features of the ancient countryside in Luke which becomes discernible only through an inter-personal reading of Luke-Acts. D.J. Bosch observes that, for Luke, salvation has six dimensions, economic, social, political, physical, psychological and spiritual and Luke gives special importance to the economic dimension. He further notes that in the parallel materials between Matthew and Luke, while Matthew emphasised justice in general Luke seems to have a particular interest in economic justice.<sup>3</sup> Luke gives the glimpse into relations between the economically powerful and the powerless. We read about the oppressed and the economically marginalised groups. They are the shepherds (Lk. 2:8), widows (2:36-38); Elijah and the widows (5:12-16); Widow at Nain (7:11-12); widow who put two coins in the temple treasury (21:1-4); lepers (6:20-21, 17:11-19); tenants (20:9-16); lame man (Act. 3:2). Ancient economics, redistribution and debt all come to expression in Luke's gospel. Debt, taxation and oppression were the painful economic realities of Luke's world. Oppressive taxation can be inferred from the tradition (Lk. 3:13-14; 19:8; 20:22; 23:2). Insolvent debtors faced prison (Lk. 12:58-59). Luke's economic policy can be seen in his emphasis on giving/forgiving/lending without expectation of return. Luke forbids usury. For example, he adds to Mt. 5:46-47, 'lend, expecting nothing in return' (Lk. 6:32-33). Luke places a definite stress on debt forgiveness. The parable of the two debtors makes this point clear (Lk. 7:41 ff.). A creditor's moral is drawn in Lk. 7:41:42. A creditor ought to forgive when the debtor is unable to pay and the debtor should do likewise to another debtor. The Lukan version of the Lord's Prayer has,

"Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive *everyone* who is in debt to us" (11:4). The remission of debt bears the image of divine forgiveness. All these observations show that Luke has a special interest in economical situation, in peasants' lives in country-sides and advocates loan without interest and forgiveness of debts in case of total inability to pay. These actions are necessary to obtain God's forgiveness.

*Cities: Religious systems and economic exploitation*

In a city life, the temple in Jerusalem has a central focus in Luke as the social and economic system centered in the temple. It represents an alienating form of collective institutional life since it marginalised the people.<sup>4</sup> In the temple system, Luke delineates the realities of the socio-economic life. Temple had a considerable economic power from taxes, tithes, sacrifices and offerings. They were means by which the economic power of a priestly and aristocratic elite was maintained. Elliott points out that Jesus condemned the economic corruption perpetuated by the temple authorities. 'He (Jesus) condemns a system organised not for prayer, justice and mercy but for self-aggrandisement and exploitation'.<sup>5</sup> The merchants made it a den of robbers (Lk. 19:45-47). The Pharisees are condemned by Jesus as lovers of money and extortionists (Lk. 11:42: cf. 11:37-44; 12:1; 15:1-31; 16:14-15; 18:9-14). The prayers of the Pharisees and the tax-collector show the prevailing social and religious differences (Lk. 18:9-14). Temple was a place for seeking aims (Ac. 3) and represents 'a system dominated by ... an exclusivist holiness ideology, a hierarchically stratified social order, and exploitative economic interests'.<sup>6</sup>

The episode of the poor widow is a case in point (Lk. 21:1ff.). Many of us would select this text to illustrate the selfless giving which each Christian ought to emulate. I have heard preachers drawing the thought from the text saying, 'It is not how much we give but how much we keep'. This is a case of intra-personal reading of the text inducing people to give more. But in an inter-personal reading, this text is read in the light of the preceding and the following passages. The widow was poor because she was victimised for the sake of an oppressive

religious system. Whatever little wealth she had was devoured by the religious leaders of Luke's day. Hence her only two very small copper coins, which are just enough to buy a meagre meal, stands as an evidence to the practices of the scribes who 'devour widows houses' (Lk. 20:46-47). In spite of the economic injustice, she still gave to God whatever she had. But the main emphasis of the episode is that Jesus did not only praise the widow for her action but lamented over the fact that she had been exploited. There are people who are responsible for her present condition of poverty. It is because Luke wants to emphasise the economic injustice, 'Luke is satisfied to have this episode immediately precede Jesus' prediction of the temple's destruction'.<sup>7</sup> Temple was the symbol of the dominance of the economic system. Jesus predicts an end to such an exploitative religious system operated from and by the temple.

The temples of the non-Jews were no different. In the accounts of the mission of Paul in Acts we read that there was a guild of silversmiths who were rich by making silver statues of Artemis (Ac. 19:23ff.). They had acquired enormous wealth through this business. Paul's mission puts this business in jeopardy. It posed a danger to their lucrative trade which exploited the religious feelings of the non-Jews by manufacturing and selling idols for them. In Ephesus is a classic example of a religious system which makes use of religion for economic gains. A similar situation existed in Philippi where a group of people owned a slave girl who had a spirit of divination (Ac. 16:16ff.). She brought her owners much gain by soothsaying. Slavery was preserved for the sake of economic gain to make few people rich. The mission turned the tables on them.

### *Regions: Starving people for political gains*

We have so far looked at the economic scenarios of village and the city lives and how they formed the 'soil' for Christian gospel. Luke also presents a situation in which two regions are involved over a matter of food-grains. In Ac. 12:20-23, we read a story about King Agrippa I (10 B.C.-44 A.D.) who turned food into a political weapon. This aspect of the story, whose historicity is never seriously doubted, has often been

overlooked. Luke narrates that the delegates from Tyre and Sidon, cities of the province of Syria, were on a mission to meet Herod Agrippa I with a view to plead for peace. Luke says that Herod was angry (raged violently) with the people of Tyre and Sidon. The reason for their visit is that Tyre and Sidon depended on Herod's administration for food. The nature of the problem could well be that Herod had banned grain-exports to Tyre and Sidon. He had declared an economic embargo on the people of the cities of Tyre and Sidon. The situation must have been serious and that the livelihood of the people was very badly affected. It is explained that Herod took the law into his own hands without referring the problem to the legate of Syria, and brought the people of Tyre and Sidon to their knees by an economic blockade. There is another political matter which made the situation still worse. There was persistent hostility between Herod Agrippa I and Vibius Marsus, the governor of Syria. Herod made food into a political weapon.

The backdrop of the situation is that, according to Luke, there was a famine which affected the whole inhabited world (Ac. 12:1ff). Such a famine took place around the same time during the reign of Claudius (41-54 A.D.) though it is not clear how widespread the famine was.<sup>8</sup> There is a connection between Herod's death, which was a miracle of punishment, and the famine. It was an arrogant display of Herod's authority when he made the people suffer by enforcing a grain embargo. Herod's action manifests itself as an expression of human pride and glory. This invited a terrible punishment from God as the angel of the Lord smote him and he was eaten by worms and died. His death sentence is not just because he imprisoned Peter and persecuted the Church but because he exercised his power in an arrogant manner to the extent of depriving people of their sources of sustenance, the food.

The worst form of Herod's hubris is that, when the people came seeking for peace so that they can overcome the effects of the famine by receiving grain from his government, he put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne and made an oration to them. Josephus comments that the garment was made of silver (*Antiq* XIX, 344). Herod showed himself as a god and the people acclaimed him to be so. When people were

famine-stricken he was revelling in pomp and glory of his kingdom. For this he deserved the worst punishment from God. God's punishment of Herod happened when, according to Luke, Paul and Barnabas were fulfilling their relief mission to the Church in Jerusalem. The Christian community which decided to support the brethren afflicted by the famine stands as a model by which may be judged Herod's authority in terms of his punitive economic blockade of the Tyrians and Sidonians. For Luke, the ideal ruler is Joseph, whom he presents in the speech of Stephen as one who fed the people when there was a famine throughout all Egypt and Canaan (Ac. 7:9ff.).

### *God the Nourisher—A Case for 'Theo-economics'*

Luke's economic interest is also in line with his understanding of God. Luke's readers needed to practice giving alms and other forms of benefactions (Lk. 12:33-34; 18:22; 19:11-26). The benevolence is exemplified by the centurion at Capernaum (Lk. 7), the good Samaritan (Lk. 10), Zacchaeus (Lk. 19), Barnabas (Ac. 4) and Cornelius (Ac. 10). All these actions embody the generosity of the divine Benefactor and they are not attempts to heap good merits to attract God's favour. When Matthew has, 'You must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Mt. 5:48) Luke changes it to 'As God the Father is merciful so his children ought to be merciful' (Lk. 35-36).

Luke portrays God as 'the giver of food' to humanity. The prayer 'Give us our bread' is made to God only in the gospels. But Luke's form of the Lord's prayer stresses the aspect of the continuous giving of bread every day. In the following parable of the friend requesting help at mid-night, the focus is on the bread. The inference one ought to draw is that God gives men bread likewise. For Luke, God feeds humanity (Lk. 12:24). God has filled the hungry with good things (Lk. 1:53). The whole world was created by God and therefore the whole universe was regarded as God's domain.

### *Speeches in Acts*

The essentials of human life including food form a central part of the early Church's preaching. Bultmann is right when



he says that NT theology begins with the kerygma of the earliest Church and not before.<sup>9</sup> In Paul's preaching in Lystra God is declared as the living God. This is often interpreted to mean that Paul preaches God who lives as opposed to idols (which are dead) that were worshipped in Lystra. But the expression 'living God' affirms the connection between food and God. The 'Living God' is a 'life-giving' God. God i) does good and ii) gives rain from heaven and fruitful seasons and iii) satisfies humanity with food and gladness. The rains make the times fruitful and the nourishment thus brought to men fills their hearts with gladness. God is a living God and he makes the life of humanity with food and gladness. The rains make the times fruitful and the nourishment thus brought to men fills their hearts with gladness. God is a living God and he makes the life of humanity possible. God is at work in and through nature to provide food for humanity. This is the essential feature of the Kerygma of the early Church. The preaching of Paul before the Areopagus makes a similar declaration (Ac. 17:23ff.). God is the Maker of the world and everything in it and ii) He is the Lord of the heaven and earth because he gives life and breath to all men. The parable of the rich man illustrates this (Lk. 16:19 ff.). The rich man hoards his plenty and then relaxes under the assumption that his troubles are over.<sup>10</sup> He does not see the abundance of food as from God and therefore does not realise that such rich resources are to be shared with others. The life and the breath belong to God. Creation is not something which happened in the beginning and is over and done with. God feeds humanity; he nourishes them with rains and fruitful seasons; he gives them life.

This work of God is universal. The earth resources derive their origin from God and they belong to the nations, the peoples of the earth. All economic policies, their planning and implementation should reflect this economic principle which I prefer to call 'theo-economics'. No nation on earth can claim that it is entitled to enjoy a large percentage of the earth's resources and that the nourisher God wills that many nations should consume less. Equal and just distribution of food and earth's resources are demanded by the gospel of God. No nation

has the right exploit to and waste the earth's resources since God is the owner. The Lystran speech makes special reference to God's creation of the resources in sea which in an unscrupulous manner are annihilated by arrogant men who prepare themselves for war and mass destruction. The principle of theo-economics maintains that God will supply food for his children as surely as he provides food for the ravens of the sky. Luke never says that earth is under a curse as a result of man's sin and that the fruits of the earth are unattainable for large sections of humanity due to their sinful deeds. Man is under a guarantee that he will be fed by God just as he feeds the other living beings (Lk. 12.22 ff.). Indeed, man is special and is worthy of God's care and nourishment. It is man who has denied this right to man and broken the promise made by God for human sustenance and livelihood.

### Conclusion

What we have done so far is that we adopted a different reading model to read Luke's writings, i.e. an inter-personal reading in the place of an intrapersonal reading. The latter focuses on individual edification and it freezes the social aspects which are necessary ingredients of God's active word. Intrapersonal reading delimits God's dealing to the sphere of heart and to the 'goods and bads' individual's life. Whereas, inter-personal reading opens up our eyes to see the wider socio-economic sphere which needs to be brought under God's rule.

Luke's deals with rural, urban and regional economic realities and their problems. Luke's stress on forgiveness of debts is particularly relevant to the global economic situation. The ethos of God's kingdom is to forgive everyone who is indebted to us. Both the developed and the developing nations find here an ideal model to follow. To lend with no expectation of the return is to be the child of the Most High. Luke is severely against usury, over-taxation and other forms of economic exploitation of the weak and poor. C. Rowland and M. Corner are right when they say that the First World highlights its giving but it keeps silent about its taking.<sup>11</sup> Food and food distribution are also dominant forms of Christian mission in

Luke. The new economic policy has further widened the gap between the rich and the poor countries and millions of people die for want of food. The life-style of the rich is to be challenged to facilitate economic justice of sharing equally the earth's resources. We should apply the principles of theo-economics to eradicate world poverty. It is wrong to maintain that the social world of the first century is totally different from ours. This makes one to extract only the 'timeless truths' contained in the Bible and apply them to our present situation. Nor is it right to assume that the situation that existed then corresponds exactly to ours. We must avoid both these extremes. What we have seen so far is that how the author called Luke assessed the socio-economic realities of his day and he sought to encounter them. God is the life-giving God and he forgives our sins when we forgive the debts of others. Luke has a lot to offer to the old as well as the new economic ambiguities of the present world.

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