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Beth Phillips

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# "What Do You Mean By Crushing My People?": Eighth-Century Prophets and 21st-Century Economics

BETH PHILLIPS

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When Yahweh entered into covenant with the Hebrew people, a major component of that covenant was that the community of the people of Yahweh was to be one in which the poor received care and the people engaged in fair economic practices that aimed to reduce poverty. The sabbatical year and the year of jubilee are the two most striking examples of structural, communal provisions for the needs of the poor and for economic equality in the Hebrew Scriptures.

The Torah describes the sabbatical year as a time when crops were not to be cultivated or harvested by landowners so that the land could rest and so that the poor could help themselves to the fruits of the land (Exod 23:10-11, Lev 25:1-7). Debts were to be forgiven (Deut 15:1-11), and slaves were to be set free (Deut 15:12-18).

In the 50th year, the year of jubilee, the people were directed to return land to its original owners in addition to following the provisions of the sabbatical year (Lev 25:8-17, 25-28). In these and many other ways, Yahweh's covenant included provisions for economic justice and equality.

Many of us are well aware that the eighth-century prophets delivered harsh rebukes for covenant unfaithfulness. However, few of us grew up hearing Bible school lessons or Sunday sermons that focused on the *economic dimensions* of these rebukes. A major theme in several of the prophetic books is that the people have been unfaithful to Yahweh because they have not cared for the poor and have engaged in unfair economic practices that created and sustained poverty and oppression.

Amos delivered the message that Israel would suffer severe consequences for choosing to "sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals—trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth and push the afflicted out of the way" (2:6b-7). They chose to "oppress the poor" and "crush the needy" while living in luxury (4:1, 6:4-7). They left the poor with no legal recourse because the leaders took bribes in exchange for ignoring the pleas of the poor (5:11-13). And they longed for Sabbath to end so that they could make profits by selling their grains weighed on fixed scales, "buying the poor for silver ... and selling the sweepings of the wheat" (8:4-6).

Isaiah's words from Yahweh included similar indictments for the people of Judah.

Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey! (10:1-2)

It is you who have devoured the vineyard; the spoil of the poor is in your houses. What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor? says the Lord God of hosts. (3:14b-15)

Micah described Judah as a people who would "covet fields, and seize them; houses, and take them away; they oppress householder and house, people and their inheritance" (2:2). He described unfair trading

practices of using “wicked scales and a bag of dishonest weights” (6:11). He denounced Judah’s prophets who “cry ‘Peace’ when they have something to eat, but declare war against those who put nothing in their mouths” (3:5).

Its rulers give judgment for a bribe, its priests teach for a price, its prophets give oracles for money, yet they lean upon the Lord and say, “Surely the Lord is with us! No harm shall come upon us.” (3:11)

At least three important features of these passages should be noted:

1. According to these prophets, Yahweh was offended by the wide gap that existed between rich and poor. Although the covenant described in the Torah had numerous provisions for narrowing this gap, the people either were not practicing these provisions or were practicing them in ways that violated the law’s intent even while they claimed to have fulfilled the letter of the law. It was an offense to the covenant that some lived in luxury while many lived in poverty.
2. The gap between rich and poor was not the result of hard work or righteousness on the part of the rich and laziness or fault on the part of poor (as we humans consistently want to believe is the cause of such gaps); rather, it was the result of dishonest and oppressive economic practices. Grain was measured deceptively, land was seized from rightful owners, bribery was rampant, and violence was used for economic gain and domination.
3. According to these prophets, these economic factors were just as offensive to Yahweh as the idolatry practiced by Israel and Judah. In fact, economic injustice and idolatry cannot be neatly separated. The people were idolaters when they worshipped and trusted in other gods, and they were idolaters when they trusted in their riches more than Yahweh and became willing to violate their covenant with Yahweh by oppressing the poor for their own profit. The provisions for economic justice in the Torah required profound trust in Yahweh. How else could farmers abandon their crops for an entire year every seventh year and still have assurance that their families would eat? Thus, the gap between rich and poor violated the covenant both in the unfair treatment of the poor and in the failure to trust Yahweh for provision.

### **EIGHTH-CENTURY PROPHETS AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS**

Through Christ we have been granted the privilege of entering into the covenant relationship Yahweh initiated with the Hebrew people. And we, like them, are given ethical responsibilities along with covenant privileges. Exactly how the ethical provisions and protocols found in Hebrew scriptures translate into Christian discipleship is a complicated question, the answering of which is the life’s work of several scholars.<sup>1</sup>

However, few (if any) Christian ethicists question the direct relevance and normativity of the principles of economic justice found in both the Torah and the prophets. Perhaps the major factor contributing to this agreement is the astounding volume of Jesus’ teachings that echo these principles. In the gospels, one out of every 10 verses deals with money, wealth and/or poverty—in Luke, the count is one out of every seven.

Therefore, we must put the challenges of the eighth-century prophets to ourselves:

1. Are we paying attention to and working to decrease the gap between rich and poor? Or do we live in luxury while others live in desperate need?



2. Are the gaps that exist the result of unfair economic practices in which we either actively engage or passively comply?
3. Do the answers to these questions reveal in us more trust in our God who asks us to care for the poor or in our own economic ideologies and gains?

As we seek to answer these questions, we must grapple with a feature of our economic existence that sets us quite apart from the worlds of the prophets' eighth century and Jesus' first century: globalization. In its most basic sense, globalization is the phenomenon often described by phrases like, "the world just keeps getting smaller."

The diverse nations and peoples of the world are increasingly connected to, interrelated with, and aware of one another. Globalization has cultural, religious, technological, and political—as well as economic—dimensions and consequences. As one Christian ethicist has noted, the phenomenon itself should not be hailed as entirely good nor denounced as entirely evil. Globalization has many faces that

should be understood as ambiguous, with potential for good and evil. ... For Christian ethics ... the challenge is to distinguish how the very same face may be experienced in different ways. Good for whom? Evil for whom? These are the crucial questions.<sup>2</sup>

### **GLOBAL POVERTY AND THE GAP BETWEEN RICH AND POOR**

The first reality with which we must reckon is that global poverty is not decreasing. Global poverty is on the rise, and the gap between rich and poor is growing rapidly. According to Oxford-trained economist Richard Parker, 100 of the world's countries have experienced economic decline over the past 30 years. In the 1990s alone, nearly 500 million people joined the ranks of the world's poorest.<sup>3</sup>

Three billion people are trying to survive on less than \$2 a day.<sup>4</sup> Many are not surviving. In 2003, more than "50 million—50,000,000—people will die of preventable disease or malnutrition," and more than 12 million of those people will be children who have not yet seen their fifth birthdays. That means close to 40,000 children will die in poverty each and every day of 2003. The United Nations estimates that the majority of these 50 million deaths would not occur if there were just \$1-\$2 per person available for food or medicine.<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, the world's rich are getting richer. "Since 1960 alone, the income gap between rich and poor states has doubled, leaving the richest states controlling more global income than they ever did back when they directly ran colonial empires."<sup>6</sup> According to the United Nations, in 1960, the wealthiest 20 percent of the world's population made 30 times more than the poorest 20 percent. By 1990, they made 60 times more.<sup>7</sup>

If we were to gather 100 people who precisely represented global ratios as of 1999, they would include 57 Asians, 21 Europeans, 14 from North and South America, and eight Africans. Thirty of these people would be white; 60 would be people of color. Thirty of them would be Christian. Half of their total wealth would belong to only six of them—that means 50 percent of the wealth would be in the hands of 6 percent of the population—and all six would be U.S. citizens. Eighty would live in substandard housing; 60 would be illiterate; 50 would be malnourished. Only one would have a college education. Not one of them would own a computer.<sup>8</sup>

### **GLOBAL POVERTY AND THE ECONOMIC PRACTICES OF GLOBALIZATION**

Global poverty as a phenomenon cannot be attributed to a single cause nor a single type of cause. Globalization is not the root cause of all current global poverty, and proponents of economic globalization are equipped with many figures demonstrating specific positive impacts of globalizing trends. However, we



must also come to terms with certain features of globalization that clearly benefit wealthy people in wealthy nations and continue to leave the poor behind or even worsen their plight. A few of these features are the practices of transnational corporations, the abstract nature of globalized economics, and the ascendancy of the market over national sovereignty and democracy.

### *Transnational Corporations*

Many critics of globalization point specifically to certain practices of enormously powerful corporations that are not situated within any one nation and are therefore able to transcend the political, legal, and economic standards of any of the nations within which they work. They are thus called multinational or transnational corporations (TNCs). The number of TNCs is growing rapidly (as are their profits) because of their combination of advanced technologies with the lowest possible labor costs—plus the mobility to move

**According to the United Nations, in 1960, the wealthiest 20 percent of the world's population made 30 times more than the poorest 20 percent. By 1990, they made 60 times more.**

production from nation to nation in order to ensure that combination.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, a defining feature of economic globalization is that production and jobs are continuously moving from high-wage to low-wage locations. Although supporters of TNCs highlight the growth of job availability in previously preindustrial locations, many scholars find that the plight of the poor is worsened in both the places abandoned by TNCs and in many of their new locations. Unemployment

and devastated communities are left in high-wage locations abandoned by TNCs, while many workers in low-wage locations gain jobs but in harmful, industrial working conditions with no benefits. Some corporations now capitalize on the fear of industrial relocation through the practice of “corporate retention,” a euphemism for extracting millions of dollars in government benefits by threatening to leave.<sup>10</sup>

Many Americans are all too painfully aware of the hundreds of thousands of jobs that have been lost and communities that have been abandoned by TNCs. Perhaps, however, few of us are familiar with the more than 2,000 factories that have opened in Mexico where many workers labor under harsh and loosely regulated conditions for less than \$4 per day.<sup>11</sup> In Mexico, as well as in China, India—and in increasing numbers of illegal sweatshops in America where both wages and conditions may be even worse—these jobs largely fall to women and children.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, desperate to seize upon opportunities for new jobs, governments around the globe are granting TNCs enormous subsidies, tax exemptions, and exemptions from workplace regulations.<sup>13</sup> Many of these corporations further evade taxes through the practice of “transfer pricing,” the manipulation of prices achieved by transferring products between nations, declaring profits where taxes are low and declaring low profits or losses where taxes are high.<sup>14</sup> Other TNCs specialize in the privatization of basic services such as water, sanitation, and health care in developing nations, often charging prohibitive prices.<sup>15</sup>

### *Economics in the Abstract*

Another major contention of economists and ethicists who are critical of economic globalization is that the nature of globalized trade, investment, and development has become increasingly abstract. The focus of trade has shifted from goods and services to speculative monetary trade. Investment has shifted from production-oriented activity to investment in currencies. Financial transactions now outnumber real transactions (exchange of goods and services) by 30 to one.<sup>16</sup> One consequence of these shifts is that production-focused trade tends to concern itself with long-term benefits of larger groups, while speculative trade is more concerned with short-term profits of the investing elite.<sup>17</sup>



Furthermore, proponents of globalization tend to measure economic development in terms of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) rather than factors more closely tied to the realities of people living in developing nations, factors such as employment and standard of living. Some economists and ethicists are questioning the usefulness of GDP as a measure of true economic development.<sup>18</sup>

A country may have a large increase in exports and yet suffer dramatic drops in employment as the economy becomes industrialized and industries increasingly rely on machines instead of human labor. Or a country's GDP may increase along with employment, but the majority of workers may suffer terrible working conditions without recourse because of deregulation, and their health may deteriorate due to pollutants from the deregulated industries that employ them. Or a country's economy may appear strong according to GDP even if it is based on exporting cash crops that use the arable land needed for starving citizens of the country.

### *The Global Market and Democracy*

Many Americans believe that one of the best exports we have to offer in the era of globalization is democracy. Most of us understand our own economic stability and democracy to be integrally related. What many do not realize is that the "free" in "free trade" rarely corresponds to the freedoms enjoyed when democracy is strengthened. The power of TNCs, which are not accountable to any one locality, and the transnational powers of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund are considered threats to national sovereignty and democratic processes by many scholars.<sup>19</sup>

Virtually all economists and policy makers agree that market-based economies require some regulation to prevent wealth from concentrating, the gap between rich and poor from widening, and costs – in the forms of environmental degradation, decreased consumer safety, and financial mismanagement – from being shifted from corporations to the general public. But while these considerations have produced broad regulatory apparatuses within all countries, the international economy is left largely unregulated in these areas. Furthermore, nearly all people would agree with the idea that economic regulations should be set in some democratic fashion. ... Yet here too the international economy fails. Those regulatory institutions that do exist are heavily dominated by the wealthier countries, conduct their proceedings in secret, and incorporate standards set by corporate-affiliated "experts."<sup>20</sup>

Economic policies that affect citizens of most of the world's nations are not being made by democratically elected officials or representative bodies; they are being determined by the market. The results include the deterioration of democratic processes and national sovereignty—as well as the "ongoing exclusion of non-monetary values from public policy making."<sup>21</sup>

### **GLOBAL POVERTY, TRUST IN YAHWEH AND COVENANT RESPONSIBILITY**

Perhaps you are thinking at this point, "What does all this talk of TNCs and GDPs have to do with the average reader of *Leaven*?" True, most of us are not directly involved in government policy-making, international investment, economic development, or world trade. But we are all involved in fanning the flame that powers the engines of economic globalization: consumption.

We buy the \$1.70 cups of coffee for which laborers in Africa and South and Central America are paid less than \$1 a day to harvest. We buy the diamonds that motivated an astoundingly bloody civil war in poverty-torn Sierra Leone. The TNCs make our famous-brand tennis shoes and designer clothing. They import our produce and hundreds of other items we use and consume every day. Our choices as consumers are not "private"; they have profound impacts on the poor of America and the entire world.

Where, then, is our trust? Will we trust in the market? Will we trust in our own, comfortable standard of living? Or will we trust in the God who called Israel and Judah and calls us now to faithfulness in a

covenant relationship that demands care for the poor and reduction of poverty? What, then, is our covenant responsibility in this global economic context?

For the purposes of this article, I have focused on making the case that some things are wrong with the global economy and that the critiques of the eighth-century prophets are as penetrating to our lifestyles of relative luxury as they were to the wealthy elite of Israel and Judah. Much more needs to be said—and is being said by many concerned Christians—about what should be done in response. I will conclude by commenting only briefly on the three levels of needed action.

1. **Political/structural:** Those who are ethicists, economists, policy makers, etc., must envision alternative mechanisms of global economics. Those who are citizens must push for their implementation.

2. **Spiritual/communal:** Our churches must intentionally choose to become communities of care for the poor.<sup>22</sup>

3. **Individual/lifestyle:** We should each buy locally whenever possible and resist consumerism. Reuse, share, go without, get creative.<sup>23</sup>

We no longer have the luxury (if indeed we ever had it) of viewing the needs and wants of our own local community apart from the requirements of the entire world. From the shoes we wear and the food we eat to the companies for which we work, we are entwined with members of the human family half a planet away. ... [O]ur Christian faith demands of us that our concern for our neighbor extend not only to our friends, but to the stranger, the resident alien, the foreigner. And globalization has brought the concerns of the stranger as close to home as those of our best friends and closest family members.<sup>24</sup>

#### BETH PHILLIPS

Ms. Phillips is working toward her Ph.D. in Christian ethics at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, CA. She is a member of the University Church of Christ in Malibu, CA.

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 For example, see Bruce Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down: The Old Testament, Ethics, and Christian Life* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991).
- 2 Elisabeth Gerle, "Contemporary Globalization and its Ethical Challenges," *Ecumenical Review* 52 (April 2000): 158.
- 3 Richard Parker, "From Conquistadors to Corporations," *Sojourners* (May-June 2002): 24.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 22.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 21.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 22.
- 7 Bob Goudzwaard, "Globalization, Exclusion, Enslavement," *Reformed World* 46 (Summer 1996): 100.
- 8 Figures are from T. Roberts of Tulane University, quoted by Armando Lampe, "Globalization of Poverty," *Exchange* 28 (1999): 332.
- 9 Goudzwaard, 99.
- 10 Thomas R. Rourke, "Contemporary Globalization: An Ethical and Anthropological Evaluation," *Communio* 27 (Fall 2000): 499.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 493-5.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 493-4. See also Goudzwaard, 102-3.
- 13 Rourke, 498.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 499.
- 15 Clarence J. Dias, "Globalization, Racism, and Discrimination," *Church & Society* 91 (January-February 2001): 18.
- 16 Goudzwaard, 101.
- 17 Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, "A Christian Ethical Re-Read of Economic Globalization," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 52 (1998): 134 ; Gerle, 164; and Dias, 19.
- 18 Moe-Lobeda, 138.
- 19 Gerle, 166. See a more extensive argument on this matter from one Christian ethicist, Moe-Lobeda, 131-55. See also Dias, 18-20.



- 20 Harry Browne, "It's a Shrinking World After All," in *Who is My Neighbor? Economics as if Values Matter* (Washington, DC: Sojourners, 1994): 27.
- 21 Rourke, 496.
- 22 A good place to start may be to study jointly Ron Sider's books, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1997) and *Just Generosity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1999).
- 23 A good resource in this regard is *Simpler Living, Compassionate Life: A Christian Perspective*, ed. Michael Schut (Denver: Living the Good News, 1999), which also includes a group study guide.
- 24 Scott Paeth, "Stewardship, Prosperity, and Justice," in *The Local Church in a Global Era: Reflections for a New Century*, eds. Max Stackhouse, Tim Dearbon, and Scott Paeth (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2000), 23.

