

## **The Concept of Economy in Judaism, Christianity and Islam**

# **Key Concepts in Interreligious Discourses**



Edited by  
Georges Tamer

## **Volume 9**

# **The Concept of Economy in Judaism, Christianity and Islam**

---

Edited by  
Christoph Böttigheimer and  
Wenzel Maximilian Widenka

**DE GRUYTER**

**KCID Editorial Advisory Board:**

Prof. Dr. Asma Afsaruddin; Prof. Dr. Nader El-Bizri; Prof. Dr. Christoph Böttigheimer;  
Prof. Dr. Patrice Brodeur; Prof. Dr. Elisabeth Gräb-Schmidt; Prof. Dr. Assaad Elias Kattan;  
Dr. Ghassan el Masri; PD Dr. Elke Morlok; Prof. Dr. Manfred Pirner; Prof. Dr. Kenneth Seeskin

ISBN 978-3-11-078230-1

e-ISBN (PDF) 978-3-11-078248-6

e-ISBN (EPUB) 978-3-11-078268-4

ISSN 2513-1117

**Library of Congress Control Number: 2022943602**

**Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek**

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie;  
detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at <http://dnb.dnb.de>.

© 2023 Walter de Gruyter GmbH, Berlin/Boston

Printing and binding: CPI books GmbH, Leck

[www.degruyter.com](http://www.degruyter.com)

## Preface

This volume at hand of the book series “Key Concepts in Interreligious Discourses” (KCID) documents the results of a conference which dealt with the concept of “Economy” in Judaism, Christianity and Islam and was held at the Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt. The conference was organised by the research unit “Key Concepts in Interreligious Discourses” and, caused by the then ongoing Corona-crisis, took place online on June 17 and 18 2020.

The research unit “Key Concepts in Interreligious Discourses” was jointly run the Friedrich-Alexander-University Erlangen-Nuremberg and the Catholic University Eichstätt-Ingolstadt between June 2018 and June 2021. As the title already implies, the mutual project focused on interreligious discourse. However, it was not about conducting an interreligious dialogue, but rather reflection upon this dialogue, therefor facilitating a theologically well founded interreligious dialogue. For only if every dialogue partner has a clear picture of what is discussed, a dialogue can be conducted reasonably. It was the project’s ambition to provide such clarification by examining concepts that are central for Judaism, Christianity and Islam, both historically and in terms of their interdependencies and by setting them in a relation to one another. By reflecting on central ideas and beliefs historically and comparatively, common values and origins, but also differences and contradictions between the three monotheistic religions are to be clearly elaborated. By disclosing key concepts of the three closely interconnected religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam, a deeper mutual understanding is fostered, prejudices and misunderstandings are counteracted and thus a contribution is made to peaceful interaction based on respect and recognition.

Only through precise knowledge of the central ideas of the foreign as well as of one’s own religion a well founded, objective and constructive interreligious understanding can prevail. Conferences at which international experts from the fields of theology, religious studies and philosophy of religion intensively discussed and clarified core religious ideas from the perspective of the three religions served this purpose. Developments within religious history never proceed in isolation; rather, they interpenetrate each other and are mutually dependent. Thus, the research unit “Key Concepts in Interreligious Discourses” pursued fundamental research and aimed at an “archaeology of knowledge” with its comparative conceptual-historical investigations.

Inasmuch as world peace cannot be obtained without religious peace, the project contributed importantly to a peaceful social coexistence and thus corresponds to the obligation that has been newly assigned to the universities in re-

cent decades, namely to engage in social concerns in addition to teaching and research. This is expressed by the term “third mission”.

I wish to thank Dr. Wenzel Maximilian Widenka, who not only organised the conference but also edited this volume. In addition to the cooperation partners of the Friedrich-Alexander-University Erlangen-Nuremberg and the de Gruyter publishing house for including this volume in the book series “Key Concepts in Interreligious Discourses”, we would like to express our sincere thanks to the third party funders, the Karpos Foundation of the Diocese Eichstätt, Maximilian Bickhoff Foundation and the ProFor Program of the Catholic University Eichstätt-Ingolstadt. Without their support, neither the conference nor the volumes would have been possible.

Christoph Böttigheimer

# Table of Contents

Reinhard Cardinal Marx

**Foreword — IX**

Moses L. Pava

**The Concept of Economy in Judaism — 1**

Andre Habisch

**The Concept of ‚Economy’ in Christianity — 43**

Rodney Wilson

**The Concept of Economy in Islam — 71**

Christoph Böttigheimer and Wenzel M. Widenka

**Epilogue — 129**

**List of Contributors and Editors — 141**

**Index — 143**





Reinhard Cardinal Marx

## Foreword

Today we are facing the demanding challenge of globalised goods-, labour- and financial markets as well as an economisation of all spheres of life. Religious communities, too, are not able to fully elude this process of a “economisation of life worlds” (J. Habermas), but they are able to critically reflect on this process and actively shape it; perhaps, where it is necessary, also with a prophetic resistance when there are aberrations and fundamentally wrong positions. First and foremost, they have to emphasize and demand again and again that labour, economy and profit are not ends in themselves, but rather means to serve the well-being of all people. They are means to a fulfilled life. The centre is the human person with his or her dignity, but also responsibility. Since economics is a social science, it is about human agency under the conditions of shortage. Without an ethical perspective, without an orientation towards values, this is impossible

The prophetic religions, the religions of revelation, do not consider the field of economy to be a space free of ethics: Already in the Torah and the prophets of Israel a criticism of social and economic deficiencies based on God’s justice can be encountered and not only regarding the people of Israel but already with a universal perspective. Calling for a work-free day in the week, the Shabbat, was in itself revolutionary and has to be defended again and again today. The prophets were also early aware of the close connection between justice and peace between humans and peoples (cf. Ps 85, 11). Jesu’s teachings contain criticism of the pure pursuit of profit and too much wealth (cf. Mt 6, 24; Lk 6, 34; Lk 16, 13), because these could destroy the proper relationship with God and between people. Islam, emerged in an environment shaped by trade, has principally a positive approach towards the economic dimension and even towards wealth, but decisively criticises excesses, aberrations and injustices in the social and economic life of these times.

The prophets focus especially on the poor, the weak like widows and orphans, the losers in social and economic events and thus become their advocates because God himself solidarizes with the weak and poor. Judaism, Christianity and Islam demand almsgiving: a mandatory social contribution is actually one of Islam’s five pillars of religious practice. However, it is about more than mere charity: the Bible and the Koran focus on “justice”, meaning acting according to community that has its model in God himself. Thus, justice became one of the fundamental pillars of Christian social teaching that evolved from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards as an answer to the social question. Christian social teaching

is not only concerned with individual agency but also with changes in social, economic, legal and political structures. It is here where I see common challenges and tasks for the religions. The model of a social and at the same time ecologically sustainable market economy could be a comprehensive concept for all religions that is surely to be respedled anew repeatedly. The religions could each contribute their own valuable accents, thus enriching one another. Active advocacy for worker's rights, fair pay, equal opportunities for participation and education, the fight against exploitation, corruption, usury, the waste of resources and destruction of the environment have to be mutual concerns, not only at a national, but also on a global level. Concerning welfare, the religious communities could perhaps cooperate more than they have done so far. Globally, especially regarding climate justice, we are speaking of an orientation towards the "global common good", i.e. the life of all people, indeed the whole creation.

For the benefit of all people, Judaism, Christianity and Islam want to and should provide a critical yet constructive contribution to a positive development of the actually existing national and global economic order, but in doing so they have to set a good example themselves. At the same instance, they will always remind us that a perfectly just and peaceful order on earth always remains an ideal to strive for, and whose fulfilment has an eschatological quantity.

May this collection of essays on economic and social ethics from the perspective of the three abrahamic religions be a contribution that initiates the necessary reflexions and discussions needed and encourages concrete action.

I want to thank the editorial team and the contributors for the important impulse and the commitment to explore and present the mutual contribution of the religions to the central questions of our time.

Reinhard Cardinal Marx,  
Archbishop of Munich and Freising

Moses L. Pava

# The Concept of Economy in Judaism

## 1 The Meaning of Wealth in the Bible

### 1.1 Covenanting in the Wilderness

Wealth, like life itself, is a sacred gift from God. Ideally, it is to be maintained, equitably shared, and, in turn, handed off to the next generation. Its annual fruits, born only through caring cultivation and the “sweat of your brow” (Genesis 3:19), are to be fully savored and enjoyed, shared, and celebrated, especially among family and community during Sabbath and communal holy days. Wealth is a this-worldly, tangible gift, given by God with the sole purpose of enhancing everyday human experiences. It is a wonderful gift lovingly received in the context of several covenants between God and Israel, most significant of which is the *brit* or covenant at Sinai (“we will do and will listen” Exodus 24:7). The *brit* defines the meaning, responsibilities, and appropriate uses of wealth.

Wealth, as a gift of God, is a central and compelling value in the Mosaic social vision. Wealth satisfies human needs, but it also elevates human dignity and provides the connective tissue of the Israelite community. Wealth, here, is not imagined as part of a utopian society, Eden on earth did not work, but it is promised as an important element toward building a meaningful and sustainable society.

While wealth is a central value, it is just one component in a set of equally compelling *Torah* values. These include freedom (from slavery), loyalty to the covenant, obedience to the law, peace, justice, mercy, charity, kindness, humility, the Israelite people as a whole, tribe, family, memory, love of God, love of the neighbor, and even love of the stranger. And, it is the singular and paramount value of *kedushah* or holiness that weaves together these values into the tapestry of an imagined holy people working, living, and worshipping peacefully in a holy land, in perpetuity. “You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:15). Such a society is to serve as a post-Edenic wholistic model for other nations to emulate, “a light unto the nations” (Isaiah 49:6), a just society that has no knowledge or need of separate economic or, even, political spheres.

In the *humash* (Five Books of Moses), human actions related to the acquisition and use of wealth gain exclusive meaning only through the sacred lenses of its many *mitsyot* (commandments) and narratives. To speak of a domain of economic activity and wealth, with its ubiquitous focus on creating ever more efficiencies, faster growth, and more profits, as a separate and stand-alone realm of human behavior, with its own purposes and its own inner logic, distinct from sacred matters, is wholly anachronistic. Ideally every “economic” activity is defined through and gains its meaning exclusively through the shared *brit* or covenant between God and Israel at Sinai. The prohibition on usury among Israelites and the cancellation of debt every seventh year provide good examples of sacred thinking trumping self-interested economic rationality. Another example from Exodus concerning non-economic thinking permeating human exchanges, is the requirement of a lender to return a borrower’s pledge before the sun sets. “It is his only clothing, sole covering for his skin. In what else shall he sleep? Therefore, if he cries out to Me, I will pay heed, for I am compassionate” (Exodus 22:26). From the perspective of a modern economist, returning the borrower’s pledge daily, is not likely to be the most “efficient” way to ensure repayment on the loan and to the maximize the lender’s wealth.

Just as every word and every letter of the Written Torah are considered holy and bursting with many levels of sacred meaning, so, too, every human action is fraught with meaning. According to the Talmudic rabbis not only are the words and letters of the Torah considered holy, but even the spaces and crowns on the letters, contain “heaps and heaps” of meaning. This being the case, it is all the more true that human actions, when properly interpreted, potentially form an integrated mosaic of sacred meaning. Human beings can never fully instantiate God’s call to *kedushah* or holiness, but the call itself is permanent.

## 1.2 What Are the Characteristics of Wealth According to the Covenant?

Examining both the specific *mitsyot* and narratives included in the Pentateuch several normative propositions concerning wealth can be derived.

Wealth is constituted mainly by land and, secondarily, by cattle, but also includes water, precious metals like gold and silver, and other booty conquered in God-sanctioned wars, including slaves, women, and children. Wealth is held in perpetuity by the Israelite nation, by individual tribes, and by families within those tribes, but not ‘owned’ in the contemporary sense of the word. The laws of inheritance are fixed.

Wealth, within the context of the covenant, carries a wholly positive valence, as can be seen by God's promise to lead the people to a land flowing with milk and honey. Thus, wealth is perceived as nurturing and sweet. Kohelet is certainly correct when he notes that "There is an evil I have observed under the sun...that God sometimes grants a man riches, property, and wealth, so that he does not want for anything his appetite may crave, but God does not permit him to enjoy it" (6:1–2). Further, wealth, and more specifically the land of Israel, not only carries a positive valence, but it is a sacred concept. The land is holy.

Wealth is finite. Its boundaries are permanently defined. Even though wealth is a gift from God it requires human effort to produce its annual return. This is born out in the narrative of the spies, when the Israelites refuse to enter the promised land after receiving their negative report, God punishes the entire generation and vows that not one of them will enter the holy land, with the exceptions of Joshua and Caleb.

Land cannot be sold in perpetuity. Land is returned to its original families during the Jubilee year, occurring once in 50 years. Debts are canceled once in every seven years, during the Sabbatical year and the land must lie fallow. Hebrew slaves are emancipated on the seventh year. Usury is prohibited among Israelites.

Israelites are commanded to guard and to remember the Sabbath and to cease working the land once every seven days, just as God rested on the seventh day, as a reminder and as a celebration that God is the sole creator of the world and redeemer of Israel. The ancient Rabbis taught, "Sanctify the Sabbath by choice meals, by beautiful garments; delight your soul with pleasure and I will reward you for this very pleasure".<sup>1</sup>

Israel is entitled to enjoy its wealth only within the context of the covenant. Dire consequences will result if Israel does not live up to its covenantal responsibilities.

Take care not to be lured away to serve other gods and bow to them. For the Lord's anger will flare up against you, and He will shut up the skies so that there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its produce; and you will soon perish from the good land that the Lord is assigning you<sup>2</sup>

These responsibilities include numerous rituals and sacrifices, but also include many social responsibilities including several provisions designed specifically to

---

1 Deuteronomy Raba 3,1

2 Deuteronomy 11:16–17

protect the poor, widows, orphans, and strangers. Among these laws include the laws of *pe'ah* and gleanings. Leviticus 19:9–10 states as follows:

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not complete your reaping to the corner of your field, and the gleanings of your harvest you shall not take. You shall not pick the undeveloped twigs of your vineyard; and the fallen fruit of your vineyard you shall not gather; *for the poor and the stranger shall you leave them* – I am Hashem, your God.<sup>3</sup> (emphasis added)

Wealth is a positive value and even holy, but greed for more wealth is not good. The narrative of the Israelites requesting meat to satisfy their hunger in the desert with its negative consequences, “you shall [eat the quail] until it comes out of your nostrils, and it be loathsome unto you,” is a permanent reminder that human desires may be infinite but human needs are finite.

With the aid of 20–20 hindsight we look back on the Pentateuch’s aspirations, knowing that the covenant, as described above, seemingly violates many of our own contemporary and hard-won notions of morality, seems to neglect certain realities and regularities of human behavior, and thus raises many difficult questions, especially for those advocating a naïve and unproblematic return to the literal Biblical worldview. Several specific issues are worth identifying explicitly.

Slavery, under certain circumstances, is treated as a legitimate form of wealth. Women, taken captive in war, are treated like a form of property for the benefit of the male Israelites. God commands Israel to destroy completely the enemy, seemingly endorsing sacred violence. God’s punishments for sinful behavior often seems disproportionate to the violation. Does the human mandate in Genesis to “subdue the earth and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth” (Genesis 1:28), give humans too much leeway to do as they please to the earth, as some contemporary environmental critics assert? Is it really a good idea to think of wealth in sacred terms or does this constitute a blurring of the sacred and the profane? Is a society devoid of a separate economic sphere at all realistic to contemplate, especially in a world of ever more specialization?

It is not the purpose of this paper to justify the Biblical worldview in its entirety, or to answer the questions raised above, but two points are worth making here. First, many of these issues and questions were raised during the Talmudic period by the Rabbis themselves. And second, what would be far stranger than a contemporary reader posing critical questions to an ancient text, would be a

---

<sup>3</sup> Leviticus 19:9–10

reader of the Pentateuch who did not have significant questions about many of the characteristics of the covenant. Here my goal has been to identify and briefly summarize some of the major themes on wealth as honestly as possible, keeping normative judgments to a minimum.

I interrogate the text of the Pentateuch, treating it as a single, unified, and sacred document, as the Rabbis in the Talmud treated it. These Rabbis were well aware of the seeming contradictions, critical questions, doubling of narratives, and other literary anomalies identified by academic critics and others over the past two centuries, but they used these oddities in the text creatively to aid in interpreting the Torah's worldview in a way that made it useable for their contemporaries and meaningful to them, given the peculiarities of their historical epoch. Given my own double aims in this study which are 1-to identify myself first as a traditional Jewish insider, and only secondarily as an academic critic, and 2-to contribute in however small a way to an ongoing and ancient conversation centered upon Jewish values as they apply to economic matters, this working assumption, I believe, strengthens my study and its conclusions. What I lose in academic precision, I gain back in Jewish authenticity. In the end, I view my decision to treat the text as a unified whole as a pragmatic choice about methodology, rather than as a truth claim about the Pentateuch.

### 1.3 Covenantal Living in the Promised Land: The Book of Ruth

For this commandment which I command thee this day, it is not hidden from thee; neither is it far off, It is not in heaven, that thou shouldest say, Who shall go up for us to heaven, and bring it unto us, that we may hear it, and do it? Neither is it beyond the sea...But the word is very nigh unto thee, in thy mouth, and in thy heart, that thou mayest do it. (Deuteronomy 30 11–14)

What little we know about the actual lived experiences of the Israelites upon entering and conquering the Promised Land is derived mainly from the *Tanah* or Prophets and Writings, and contemporary archeological discoveries. Lived reality in Israel proved to be difficult, dynamic, impossible to predict, and, in some respects, far from the Mosaic vision described above. As in real life, Israel's Biblical history is mainly one of unanticipated events, some brief moments of triumph, but failures and disasters, as well. Great and wise kings emerge, a Temple to God is built, and world-altering prophets, true to Moses's founding vision, take center stage. These prophets offer blunt and memorable criticisms of the wealthy in the name of the covenant, words of hope, dreams of power, fantasies of unity, and provocative visions of wolves and lambs living in harmony, only to

be followed by weak and idol-loving leaders, a Temple destroyed, charlatan prophets, and followers dispersed and exiled, only a remnant to return to the land many years later.

All the while Israelite poets compose songs of celebration, thanksgiving, and praise, joyously shouting, “Hallelujah,” the echo of which many still hear today. They author, edit, and collect weary dirges, prayers of redemption, books of sad wisdom and useful and practical proverbs, scrolls of human longing and love, a song of songs, and even an accusatory book, describing one man’s angry struggles with God and His claims to justice, echoing the original meaning of Israel’s founding patriarch’s God-given name Israel – “because you have struggled with God” (Genesis 32:28) The once blinding light of the shared covenant between Israel and God flickers, burning brighter and burning dimmer, in turn, but Israel’s commitment to the covenant is never completely extinguished over the long and fragile ages. In fact, the covenant, and how to interpret and apply its meanings through actions in each new generation, is usually what we mean when we speak of a “Jewish Tradition” or “Jewish Traditions.”

Michael Satlow in his book on Judaism and the economy summarize these ancient texts:

...these texts reflect an economy that centered on agriculture. The subject of the Hebrew Bible—the singular “you”—is usually a free, landholding Israelite man who derives his income from farming. Other sources of income are occasionally mentioned in passing (e.g., women’s spinning in Proverbs 31:13) but trades, crafts, manufacturing, and banking, among other professions, scarcely appear. Nor does the appearance of a market or market economy happen much until the latest texts of the Hebrew Bible. Whether or not these texts reflected the actual economy, they create an economic ideal centered around land and its periodic redistribution in order to maintain a semblance of equality among Israelite men.<sup>4</sup>

The Book of Ruth, centered on the struggles and triumphs of a Moabite widow who follows her Israelite mother-in-law back to Israel upon the sudden death of her husband, I suggest, provides the best biblical description of a world operating in consonance, at least to the extent possible, with the promises of the covenant and the many propositions identified above. It is a narrative centered upon the land of Israel, how it is to be shared, and who it is to be shared with.

Philip Birnbaum described the Book of Ruth as follows:

The narrative is one of idyllic beauty. It is the most charming short story in the Bible. It presents a pleasing picture of life in Eretz Yisrael [land of Israel] during the period of the Judges, about two generations before King David. Approximately two-thirds of the narrative is in

---

<sup>4</sup> Satlow, Michael, *Judaism and the Economy: A Sourcebook*, London: Routledge, 2019, 15.