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Contextual relecture of the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus in the view of current indebtedness and debt cancellation.

A Reminder for Christian Social Ethics

Approaches to Ethical Challenges in Business and Economics: Religious and Cultural Contributions

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Particularly in the field of business and economic Ethic is argued that there is “a horrible wide rift”– so the philosopher Ephraim Lessing - between the modern thinking and the ancient thinking. But this remark might be rather banal. Every interpretation of texts always needs to take into account the differences between economic, cultural or social circumstances. Therefore the assertion is trivial that it is impossible to transfer ethical statements from the ancient scriptures into a modern capitalistic world economy.

My thesis is the following:

Despite the historical distance, Torah alone can be the foundation of a Christian Ethics. The Torah is part of the ethical tradition of the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament. It is underdetermined to formulate timeless maxims from the ancient scriptures. My issue is not to escape the historicity of the texts and to formulate trans-historical maxims. On the contrary, it is necessary to take into account the socio-economic context and then to ask for the socio-historical continuity and discontinuity. The concrete circumstances of the texts should be seen as part of a common history and common issues.

I would like to explain my thesis by the issue of indebtedness. The peasants suffered under debts in the Ancient Orient. The famous economist of the ancient economy Moses Finley speaks about the perennial revolutionary program of the peasantry who demand “cancellation of debts and redistribution of the land.”¹ Debt has been a central concern of human societies for the last 5,000 years, to variegate the title of David Graeber’s inspiring book, “Debt: the First 5,000 Years”.² The proposed paper seeks to demonstrate that debt is also a central concern of biblical texts. The way to meet the problems of the indebted peasants was to create laws which periodically cancelled debts and freed debt-servants. I would like to demonstrate that debts are an issue in the ancient economy of the Bible and in the current time as well.

It is not a task of a Christian Ethic to apply the biblical cancellation of debt. On the contrary, the ethical question is: What can we learn today from the biblical handling of debts in the context of the ancient economy for our handling of current indebtedness? The point is: The issues are trans-historical but the answers are genuine ones in the specific circumstances of the biblical time and our time.

1. Thesis: Indebtedness is a trans-historical issue in the economic history

¹ Moses Finley, *The Ancient Economy*, Berkley and Los Angeles, 1973: 80.

² David Graeber, *Debt: the First 5,000 Years*, New York²2014; in German: *Schulden. Die ersten 5.000 Jahre*, trans. by U. Schäfer et al., Stuttgart, 2012.

Moses Finley argues: „If one wishes to grasp the basic attitude to the poor, one must look not at the occasional philanthropy but at the law of debt. That law was uniformly harsh and unyielding.“³ What Finley is saying about the handling of debts in the ancient economy holds true today as the situation in Greece shows.

A lot of poor countries take out loans to finance their development. That is neither problematic nor dangerous. But if the loans are not payable or sustainable, the repayment of the debts becomes a problem. That was the case in the eighties in the global South and it is currently so in Greece. Sovereign debt crisis is not only a financial problem but a problem for the people too. They suffer the consequences of austerity. The biblical scriptures describe an issue and a situation that is well known today.

Like their Mesopotamian analogues in royal edicts, the biblical laws cancelled debts and freed debt-servants. Debt cancellation advocated by the biblical laws about debt cancellation (Deuteronomy 15:1-18 (hebr.: Shmittah שְׁמִיטָה); Jubilee in Lev 25,8-55) were not just abstract literary ideas, but concrete legal practices freeing rural populations from debt bondage.

Let me explain what it is about debts within the New Testament with the parable of the rich man and the poor Lazarus. (Luke 16: 19-31)

The Rich Man and Lazarus

¹⁹ *“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. ²⁰ At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.*

²² *“The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³ In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴ So he called to him, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.’*

²⁵ *“But Abraham replied, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. ²⁶ And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’*

²⁷ *“He answered, ‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, ²⁸ for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’*

²⁹ *“Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.’*

³⁰ *“‘No, father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’*

³¹ *“He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”*

The main reason for poverty was the indebtedness of the peasants and tenants in the agrarian society of the Ancient Orient. The social descent from being a free landowner over indebted tenant to beggar was nothing out of the ordinary.⁴ “The struggle between rich and poor”, so Da-

³ Moses Finley, *The Ancient Economy*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1973: 80.

⁴ Vgl. Mt 5,25f; 5,40; 5,42; 6,12; 18,23-35; Lk 4,18; 16,1-8; 12,57-59.

vid Graeber, “has taken the form of conflicts between creditors and debtors.”⁵ The Roman law was harsh against the insolvent debtors. So it seems very plausible to assume that the poor Lazarus in the parable might be typical of a man’s descent from former landowner to beggar.

The parable of the rich man and the poor Lazarus unmasks the world of debts and indebtedness by telling a story. It analyses narratively social classes through their representative figures. Every typification implies a larger configuration and represents the fate of his class. The parable designs two scenarios of a deep gap between poor and rich – one on earth, the other one in heaven. When both people die, the rich man has a funeral and goes to Hades, while the poor man is carried by angels to be with Abraham in heaven. The rich man pleads with Abraham to let Lazarus come and asks for someone to warn his brothers about the fate that awaits them. But Abraham says that the great chasm between them cannot be bridged. „God helps” is the meaning of Lazarus’ Hebrew name. But how does God help against poverty and indebtedness?

Abraham’s advice to the rich man is: listen to Moses and the prophets (Luke 16: 31). To “listen to Moses” means to obey the Torah and to “listen to the prophets” means to hear the prophets who denounced social injustice. The parable explains how to solve the problem of indebtedness: to obey the Torah with its program. The Sabbatical year exempts the indebted peasants from paying back prior debts. It is the same program as that of the Ancient Orient has been for centuries: cancellation of debts as formulated in the sabbatical year release of debts in Deuteronomy (15:1-18).

But in the time of Augustus, Rabbi Hillel the Elder (30 BC - 9 AD) invented the *prozbul*.⁶ He put an end to the institution of debt cancellation. If debts were delivered to the court, the *prozbul* allowed collecting them after the Sabbatical year. The *prozbul* does not cancel debts, it cancelled the biblical right of debt cancellation. The decision was groundbreaking and controversial. The effect was that Hillel’s *prozbul* terminated a two-thousand-year tradition of debt cancellation since the Mesopotamian times. Hillel dared to abrogate the Torah institution of the cancellation of all debts every seventh year. This decision initiated a major debate whether rabbis have the authority to uproot from the Torah. The *prozbul* changed a law of the Torah in order to meet the needs of his time. Actually it allowed the elites of the priests and the aristocrats to meet their economic and financial interests. With the remark „they loved money” (Luke 16:14) the New Testament qualified these people only few verses previously. Michael Hudson’s upshot is: “Hillel’s *prozbul* yielded power to creditors and mortgage-holders.”⁷ The *prozbul* was against the old poor’s rights in the Tora.

The Jesus’ movement resisted Hillel’s *prozbul* and demanded to obey the traditional biblical Torah right according to the sabbatical year of debt cancellation in Deuteronomy. They hold in the Torah tradition and intensified: „Lend to them without expecting to get anything back” (Luke 16:35). The Jesus’ Movement defended with other Rabbis the poor’s Torah rights with the reminder “listen to Moses and the Prophets”. The Jesus’ movement resisted to obliterate the biblical right of debt cancellation in favor of the new Greek-Roman law and refused to combine obeying the Torah law and following the new Roman law. That was the reason why the Jesus movement judged: “You cannot serve both God and Money” (Luke 16:13). Debt cancellation belongs to the core of Jesus’ message.

⁵ David Graeber, Debt: the First 5,000 Years, 2014: 8

⁶ Hebrew: פרוזבול an abbreviated form of the Greek phrase πρὸς βουλῆ βουλευτῶν προσβουλευειν.

⁷ Michael Hudson, The lost Tradition of Biblical Debt Cancellation [1993], p. 38, in: <http://michael-hudson.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/HudsonLostTradition.pdf>,

The „Our father“- prayer with the demand „Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors“ (Matth 6: 12) speaks the language of the tradition of the biblical debt cancellation. The oldest Latin translation is about debts: „dimitte nobis debita nostra“, the first English translation by John Wycliffe (1395) too. The Presbyterian and other Reformed churches tend to use the rendering "forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors". Roman Catholics, Anglicans and Methodists are more likely to say "trespasses ... those who trespass against us". Luther uses in his first translation in German the verb "schulden". But some new versions changed the translation and preferred the version „forgive us our sins“ (New Century Version 1991) or in "and forgive us our wrongs" (so Today's English Version 1966).

2. Thesis: Debt cancellation of the Torah is a common Jewish-Christian heritage

Distinguished US-american Rabbis wrote a declaration „*Dabru emet* – speak the truth“⁸ about the Christian-Jewish relationship in the year 2000. They underline the common relevance of the Torah: „Jews and Christians accept the moral principles of Torah.“⁹ That means: The Biblical tradition about debt cancellation belongs to the common heritage for Jews and Christians. Christians have as the Jews to listen to Mose and the prophets. What might be these Biblical norms? The heritage is the fundamental conviction: The logic of humanity has the absolute priority over any other rationality. Debt cancellation is about freedom, the freedom from debts. Cancellation of debts is not optional, nor does it depend on the goodwill. It does not mean charity. It is a legally enforceable obligation. Nor does it depend on a specific economic doctrine. It goes hand in hand with market economy while recognizing that the market has inherent limits. The debtors' human right is the right to life. The instruments to achieve this aim may be different, but the fundamental conviction remains the same.

“What must I do?”(Luke 18:19) Jesus' answer was the reference to the Torah. The biblical scriptures are testimonials of ongoing debates. As the parable about the rich man and Lazarus shows, the New Testament belongs to the inner-biblical debate about the right understanding of the Torah in different contexts. At first, the Christian attitudes towards usury were just as harsh as in the Torah. But this tradition has been converted since the beginning of the 16th century. Unlike the Jewish theology, the Christian Ethic has lost now the biblical tradition of debt cancellation. Christian theologians renewed the biblical tradition of debt cancellation in Latin-America during the debt crisis in the eighties of the last century. But there was not one Christian Church that revives the tradition of debt cancellation during the last European debt crisis. Christian Theology reversed some theologian convictions after the Shoah. They accepted that God's covenant is not solved but still existing. What does it mean for Christians Ethics? It seems to me that Christian Ethics are long overdue for some kind of a *halacha*. Irrespective of any historical rift only the Torah with its ethical convictions can be the standard or constitution of any Christian Ethics. Decrees in Mesopotamia and the rule in Deuteronomy declared freedom for the debtors and wiped out all previous moral obligations. What does it mean to free debtors today?

3. Thesis: Debts are a current problem and debt cancellation should be a solution - inspired by the Jewish-Christian Ethics

The Bible does not have any authoritative argument per se. The principle is the following: „That which is not economically rational cannot really be humanly just,“ so the ethicist Arthur

⁸ Zit. in: <http://www.imdialog.org/md2001/012001md03.html> (Zugriff am 30.4.2011)

⁹ <http://www.jcrelations.net/Dabru+Emet+-+A+Jewish+Statement+on+Christians+and+Christianity.2395.0.html?L=3>

Rich, “and what which conflicts with human justice cannot really be economically rational.”¹⁰ What is economically rational and what is human justice does not exist alongside but is entwined. That means for the debt crisis: only those theories about debts are acceptable for a Christian Ethic who are able to bring freedom and life to the people.

Already in 2011, the US American *Boston Consulting Group* demanded a debt cancellation as in ancient Mesopotamia.¹¹ The International Monetary Fund has called for “upfront” and “unconditional” debt cancellation for Greece in 2016 as it warned that without immediate action the financial plight of the recession-ravaged country would deteriorate dramatically over the coming decades. So debt cancellation has as good biblical reasons as good economic reasons. While the Christian Ethics insist on an insoluble relationship between economic reasons and the people’s rights Christian Ethics bring the economy to its sense.

The Torah is a reservoir of centuries old praxis of a moral economy. The cultural memory to the praxis of the Torah is able to inspire a different handling of debts:

1. The German philosopher Jürgen Habermas stated: “Universalistic egalitarianism, from which sprang the ideals of freedom and a collective life in solidarity, the autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, the individual morality of conscience, human rights and democracy, is the direct legacy of the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love.”¹² He assesses the secular contribution and the religious one as equivalent. Habermas proclaims that “Christianity, and nothing else, is the ultimate foundation of liberty, conscience, human rights, and democracy, the benchmarks of Western civilization. To this day, we have no other options. We continue to nourish ourselves from this source.”¹³ To save this source the Biblical historical experiences need to bring this source together with modern sciences. The consequence is: The religious contribution of thinking is different but equal.
2. The biblical texts derive from a world in which economy was integral part of life and of ethics. Economy was embedded in a world which highly esteemed justice and righteousness. Unlike that, the modern economy postulates an autonomous sphere. Today's response to economic imbalance is to let the market resolve matters. The Biblical experiences and wisdom remind to ask whether ethics are able to govern economy or to exert ethical control over the economy. The biblical moral-based economy would be a way of reminding ourselves that only the genuine life of the people is the measure for which is economically rational. The point is: All man made structure have an ethical dimension if known or unknown, of hidden or transparent.
3. Biblical based Ethics are ethics after the end of the authoritative value of the scriptural principle. Biblical texts cannot claim validity. They are not relevant by themselves. They are restricted: Firstly the need to be proven in rational discourses. Secondly: Biblical texts are able to inspire ethics and a different praxis. People refer on them and argue with them. Only by this, these texts are becoming relevant for a special praxis. The texts are part of an ethical tradition which is orientated towards justice, freedom, human dignity and the option for the poor. That helps to make a decision between con-

¹⁰ Rich, Arthur, *Business and Economic Ethics. The Ethics of Economic Systems*, Leuven – Paris – Dudley 2006: pp. 74-75.

¹¹ Siehe u.a.: Rhodes, David / Steltert, Daniel, *Boston Consulting Group, Back zu Mesopotamia? The Looming Threat of Debt Restructuring*, 2011.

¹² Habermas, Jürgen, *Religion and Rationality: Essays on Reason, God, and Modernity*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta, MIT Press, 2002, p. 149.

¹³ Cit. in: Ambrose Ih-Ren Mong, *Dialogue Derailed: Joseph Ratzinger's War against Pluralist Theology*. Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2014, p. 279.

troversial economic theories about debts. Every theory has specific ethical implication. Only those theories which are able to enforce the freedom of the people are ethical acceptable. That means: Debt cancellation is about freedom and about freedom for indebted people. Indebtedness was always part of the human history since the time the very earliest records written. Throughout most of history, when overt political conflicts between classes did appear, it took the form of pleas for debt cancellation. Debt cancellation belongs to a concept of economy in which what is considered really important about human beings is the fact that the human beings are the core value.

4. The Torah mandated that debt cancellation should take place automatically every seven years, independent of the will of the king or any other source of authority. Without any doubts, debt cancellation is an interference with ongoing contracts. But there is no doubt that the interference with contracts could be sometimes more human and morally less questionable than to respect the contracts if they generate sufferings as in politics of austerity, in structural adjustments or even perhaps killing people. What is more human: debt cancellation automatically every seven years or the economic catastrophes we can see in Greece?

To sum up let me quote three examples inspired by the Biblical debt tradition:

Firstly: Jubilee 2000 was an international coalition movement that called in the spirit of the biblical notion of the jubilee for “one-off cancellation of the unpayable debts of the world’s poorest countries by the year 2000”. The campaign became a worldwide important movement.

Secondly: While the Churches in Europe and USA remain silent in the deep European debt crisis the ethical tradition of debt cancellation inspired new civil and resistant movements such as *Rollingjubilee*¹⁴ or *Strike Debt*¹⁵ in the USA. They refer to the old traditions and are practicing debt cancellation symbolically. Their motto is: Debt is the tie that binds the 99 percent, whether you are a student delinquent on your student loans or a parent struggling to pay healthcare bills. They abolished Millions in student debt. „You are not a loan“. Rolling Jubilee spent more than \$ 400,000 to purchase debt cheaply from banks before ‘abolishing’ it, freeing individuals from their bills. This is a sort of subversive resistance.

Thirdly: After the Second World War the 1953 London Debt Agreement allowed Germany to re-establish its role in international capital markets. The German debt deal was a key element of recovering from the devastation of the Second World War. It is time for a European-wide debt conference similar to the conference that led to the London Debt Agreement of 1953.

The biblical perspective reminds that debts and indebtedness are not only a financial concern but also about ethics. It seems to me that we are long overdue for some kind of Biblical-style debt cancellation. Debt cancellation would be salutary not just because it would relieve so much human suffering, but also because it would be our way of reminding ourselves that debts are not “a sacred principle”¹⁶. There is no need to pay all debts. Debt cancellation is a way of our culture reminding ourselves that paying one’s debt is not the essence of morality. The ethical essence is not to sacrifice life for the sake of debts; but the essential is life itself.

¹⁴ <http://rollingjubilee.org/>

¹⁵ <http://strikedebt.org/>

¹⁶ David Graeber, *Debt: the First 5,000 Years*, p. 391.

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