

False Doctrine, False God, False Economy: Scarcity and Abundance in the Song of Solomon

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Abstract

Mainstream economics is predicated on the notion that scarcity is intrinsic to the world. Heterodox approaches, however, treat abundance as the proper starting point of analysis. I argue that this is an essentially theological disagreement which is central to the discourse of the Bible. The paper begins by tracing the history of each side of the disagreement, which I respectively designate the scarcity doctrine and the abundance perspective. With reference to the history of money, the paper upholds the abundance perspective, arguing that the scarcity doctrine tends to create the very 'economic problem' which it purports to solve. The Biblical expression of the disagreement is then examined through a case study from the Song of Solomon. Viewing this passage from the abundance perspective implies a subversive reading of the text, in which the exploitative economy of Solomon is personified as a false god of scarcity. The female Lover's alternative economy is motivated by Love, which the paper suggests should also motivate an alternative economics.

Introduction: The Nature of Nature

"The Creator showers upon us his gifts - more than enough for all. But like swine scrambling for food, we tread them in the mire, while we tear and rend each other...The wonderful discoveries and inventions of our century have neither increased wages nor lightened toil. The effect has simply been to make the few richer; the many more helpless...Can it be that the gifts of the Creator may be thus misappropriated with impunity? Is it a light thing that labour should be robbed of its earnings while greed rolls in wealth - that the many should want while the few are surfeited?"¹

"The most passionate detractors of capitalism are those who reject it on account of its alleged injustice...The worst of all these delusions is the idea that 'nature' has bestowed upon every man certain

¹ Henry George, *Progress and Poverty*, (New York: Robert Schalkenbach, 1935), 550-551

rights. According to this doctrine nature is openhanded toward every child born. There is plenty of everything for everybody. Consequently, everyone has a fair inalienable claim against all his fellow men and against society that he should get the full portion which nature has allotted to him...Every word of this doctrine is false. Nature is not bountiful but stingy. It has restricted the supply of all things indispensable for the preservation of human life...Men, cooperating under the system of the division of labour, have created all the wealth which the daydreamers consider as a free gift of nature.”²

There is a perennial division within economic thought between two basic views on the nature of the world and our role within it. On the one hand is the belief, articulated here by the Austrian economist Ludwig von Mises, that the defining feature of human existence is scarcity. Nature is “stingy”, on this view, making it necessary for “men” to forge their own “wealth” - wealth, in this case, referring broadly to the material conditions for human wellbeing. The alternative view flips this narrative on its head. According to the likes of Henry George, nature is in fact profusely generous, and the apparent achievements of humankind have in fact obstructed the natural relationship between divine gift and universal wellbeing. Contrary to von Mises, it is scarcity, not abundance, which is man-made.

This disagreement is essentially theological. To be clear, though, its theological quality does not reduce merely to belief in God. The reader may have noticed that George refers to a “Creator” while von Mises does not; but, as we will see, historically it has actually been devout theists who have most zealously preached the “doctrine” of scarcity, to use the term which von Mises applies to the opposing view. Rather, the disagreement is theological because it encapsulates a range of intrinsically spiritual questions regarding the nature of reality, the answers to which form the premises of rational inquiry and the motivations for social action.

A salient example has already been evidenced in the citations above. To wit, a proponent of the scarcity doctrine is unlikely to show much concern for issues of distributive justice. If individuals create wealth by the sweat of their own brows, who can object if some end up with more than others? Even if the system is not entirely meritocratic, the only alternative is misery for all, so the “daydreamers” who envisage a more just economy will only bring about a nightmare if they pursue radical change. By contrast, an adherent of what I call the abundance perspective will consider universal wealth to be the natural state of humankind - or at least a constructive ideal - and will therefore work on the assumption that poverty and inequality reflect some form of societal corruption which can and should be rectified.

² Ludwig von Mises, *The Anti-Capitalist Mentality* (Auburn: The Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2008 [1956]), 80-81

While this disagreement has existed ever since economics first emerged, the scarcity doctrine has become the dominant narrative both within the discipline and across the wider society. In fact, so hegemonic has this ideology become that most people - be they proponents or critics of the status quo - are unaware that an economics beyond scarcity is even possible. Yet, at the same time, there is a growing sense that the status quo, with its apocalyptic convergence of social and environmental crises, demands precisely that - an alternative understanding of the nature of the world and our place within it.

Original Scarcity: The Economic Problem

For the past fifty years, mainstream economics has explicitly defined itself as the “science of scarcity”,³ or more formally “the science which studies human behaviour as a relationship between given ends and scarce means which have alternative uses”.⁴ The basic premise of this self-styled “science” is that there is only so much to go around, so we have to make choices - and every choice comes with a cost. This scarcity of resources becomes particularly critical when combined with a scarcity of humanity. In the methodology of mainstream economics - and more specifically, the branch which has come to be known as ‘neoclassical’ economics - individuals are assumed to be insatiably acquisitive, created in the image of “economic man”. The nature of the world and the nature of human beings thus conspire to produce the “economic problem”, namely that our experience of scarcity is ubiquitous and inescapable.⁵

The self-proclaimed duty of economics is to ameliorate this problem by ensuring that resources are used efficiently and, if possible, by accumulating more resources. Scarcity can never be overcome, but it can be managed, with the consolation of a “surplus” - a man-made form of abundance which allows us to survive, and perhaps even thrive, in a world of scarcity. To maximise this surplus, neoclassical economics dictates that we subject as much of the social and natural world as possible to the forces of private property and market exchange, ensuring that self-interested behaviour takes into account the intrinsic scarcity of the world. The classic example is a piece of grazing land: if nobody owns the land, so the story goes, nobody has a right to levy a price on its use, resulting in a free-for-all which

³ Heinz Kohler, *Economics: The Science of Scarcity* (Hinsdale: Dryden Press, 1970).

⁴ Lionel Robbins, *An Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science* (London: Macmillan, 1952), 15. The emergence of this school of economics (i.e. the neoclassical school) can be traced back at least to the 1870’s (the so-called ‘marginal revolution’) but it was not until the 1970’s that it became dominant (the so-called ‘neoclassical renaissance’).

⁵ Paul Samuelson and William Samuelson, *Economics*, 11th edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1980).

ultimately degrades the land. Only if the land is commodified can we be spared from this 'Tragedy of the Commons'.⁶

Neoclassical theory thus serves as an apology for capitalism, which emerged precisely by commodifying the commons. Yet in living memory, the ideology of commodification has most held sway since the 1980's. After the failure of Keynesianism to explain the economic crises of the previous decade, the tenets of neoclassical economics were upheld as articles of a new, fanatical faith which was acted out in the form of neoliberal politics.⁷ While the prophets of scarcity proclaimed the good news of The Market, economic zealots armed themselves with the weaponry of privatisation, deregulation, and liberalisation - not to mention tanks, machine guns, and napalm - to wage holy war against the heresies of socialism. The crusade was overwhelmingly victorious: the dogmas of neoliberalism became so firmly embedded in the collective psyche that they are now considered to be as absolute and immutable as the laws of nature.⁸

Keynes himself, whose ideas came back into vogue following the financial crisis of 2007/8, shared the premise that the world is intrinsically scarce - what we might call the doctrine of original scarcity. Where he differed from his neoclassical counterparts was in viewing the market system as an imperfect expedient which, if properly managed, would create sufficient surplus to one day render itself unnecessary. Writing nearly one-hundred years ago, Keynes predicted that "the economic problem may be solved, or be at least within sight of solution, within a hundred years".⁹ The theories of Karl Marx in the previous century went further in criticising the system, arguing that its entire *raison d'être* is to enable certain groups to dominate others. Ultimately, though, Marx did not reject the scarcity doctrine either. Like Keynes, he believed that capitalism was needed to forge abundance, even if it tended to generate its own scarcity in the forms of inequality, crisis, and alienation.¹⁰

⁶ See Garret Hardin, "The Tragedy of the Commons," *Science* 162, no. 3859 (Dec 13 1968).

⁷ The Austrian School represented by Friedrich Hayek also had a crucial influence. Austrian economics starts from the same premise as neoclassical economics (i.e the world is characterised by scarcity) and arrives at the same conclusion (i.e. private property and market exchange are the solutions), but its rationale is different. Broadly, whereas neoclassical economics is primarily concerned with incentivising individuals who are self-interested, Austrian economics is primarily concerned with coordinating individuals who lack complete information.

⁸ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009).

⁹ John Maynard Keynes, "Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren". In *Essays in Persuasion* (New York: Classic House, 2009 [1932]), 197.

¹⁰ Keynes maintained that these forms of scarcity should be managed and mitigated, whereas Marx believed that they would help pave the way to socialism by fomenting class consciousness and ultimately revolution.

Neoclassical, Keynesian, and Marxist economics - all of which I classify as 'mainstream' inasmuch as they espouse the scarcity doctrine - trace their origins to the Classical economics of Adam Smith. Along with his friend David Hume, a fellow bellwether of the Scottish Enlightenment, Smith provided the initial impetus for the scarcity doctrine to gain ascendancy.¹¹ Observing the unprecedented surpluses generated by the industrial revolution, Smith contended that "the wealth of nations" had to be produced; it was not the natural state of the world. What is more, he identified the market system and its attendant division of labour as the driving forces of this development, while noting that they have the potential to generate a range of social ills if left unchecked.¹² Smith particularly extolled the Market for its mystical ability to channel self-interested behaviour towards the common good, as if it were "led by an invisible hand" - a notion which would become central to neoclassical economics.¹³

It is true that Smith would not have subscribed to the neoclassical theory of economic man: as a moral philosopher, he appreciated that society is held together by socially oriented motivations such as empathy and approval in addition to self-interest.¹⁴ But this very fact implies that our material desires continually expand as we seek to emulate our peers, with the result that we are never satisfied. Whereas commentators since Aristotle had decried this tendency, regarding it as the principal source of scarcity, Smith paradoxically celebrated it even while acknowledging its futility. "It is well that nature imposes us in this manner," he declared. "It is this deception which rouses and keeps in continual motion the industry of mankind."¹⁵ In other words, the very motivations which drive us to overcome scarcity - motivations which, we should highlight, Smith insisted were imposed on us by "nature" - would ensure that scarcity remained intrinsic to the human condition.¹⁶

Smith's disciple, the cleric-cum-economist Thomas Robert Malthus, later took these ideas and ran with them. Malthus shared the premise that the world is intrinsically scarce, but he was unconvinced that this scarcity could be overcome, even in the self-defeating sense of Smith. Whereas Smith was primarily interested in industrial production, the scale of which was limited only by the extent

¹¹ Nicholas Xenos, *Scarcity and Modernity* (London: Routledge, 1989).

¹² Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (London: W. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1776), Book 1, Chapter 3. See also Book 1, Chapter 6.

¹³ Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, Book 4, Chapter 2. Smith also used this phrase in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (London: A. Millar, 1761 [1759]), 274.

¹⁴ Smith, *Moral Sentiments*.

¹⁵ Smith, *Moral Sentiments*, 288.

¹⁶ Charles Clark, "Wealth as Abundance and Scarcity: Perspectives from Catholic Social Thought and Economic Theory" in *Rediscovering Abundance*, edited by Helen Alford et al. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006).

of the market, Malthus focused on food; and food, he noted, was subject to material limits which meant that its production would inevitably be outstripped by population growth.¹⁷ The result was a natural cycle of scarcity and abundance, in which the poor would bear the brunt of rising living costs (i.e. scarce food) and falling wages (i.e. abundant labour). In response to this mounting misery, they may choose to have less children, bringing the population back into balance; but ultimately it was “positive checks” such as war, plague, and famine which ensured that the iron law of scarcity would not be broken.¹⁸

It is with Malthus that the theological foundations of the scarcity doctrine - and, perhaps, the cracks in those foundations - become clear.¹⁹ As a good clergyman, Malthus could not resist deriving a moral framework from his analysis of scarcity, though with hindsight it seems he was really projecting his own elitist inclinations. On the one hand, echoing Smith, he viewed scarcity as a “school of virtue” which God “ordained” in order to “rouse man into action, and form his mind to reason”.²⁰ According to Malthus’ dismal view of human nature, “man” (by which he undoubtedly meant the poor) would “sink into listless activity” if he was not compelled to exert effort and ingenuity in order to survive.²¹ Such exertions would never be sufficient to overcome the scarcity of food relative to population, so he would also be compelled to exercise the virtue of restraint. But on the other hand, to avoid the miseries of overpopulation, he may instead degenerate into vice, a category in which Malthus (to some extent a product of his time) included as varied phenomena as abortion, family breakdown, prostitution, contraception, and homosexuality.

Malthus concluded that there was a sweet spot between scarcity and abundance which would elicit the better angels of our nature, and that the chief responsibility of the state was to maintain this happy medium. This grim philosophy, famously satirised by Charles Dickens in the character of Ebenezer Scrooge, has pervaded welfare policy for the last two centuries. In his own lifetime, politicians seized on Malthus’s ideas (and those of like-minded ‘evangelical’ economists) to end subsidies for the poor and force those seeking relief into the wicked workhouses of *A Christmas Carol*. Malthusian principles still prevail in the neoliberal age: if it was neoclassical economics which sanctioned the agenda of reckless liberalisation, it was Malthusian economics which motivated the horrors of austerity politics. For example, in 2015, the Coalition Government justified the two-child limit to social

¹⁷ Thomas Robert Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (London: J. Johnson, 1798).

¹⁸ Malthus, *Essay*, Chapter 5.

¹⁹ Albino Barrera, *God and the Evil of Scarcity: Moral Foundations of Economic Agency* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005).

²⁰ Malthus, *Essay*, 110-114.

²¹ Malthus, *Essay*, 112-113.

security on transparently Malthusian grounds, pontificating that benefit claimants “should face the same financial choices about having children as those supporting themselves solely through work”.²² They even went so far as to introduce an exemption for children who were conceived “non-consensually”, i.e. through rape.

Indeed, this is the sort of economic justice espoused by the scarcity doctrine more generally, which holds that people who lose from the economic system only have themselves to blame. They may even be a legitimate object of blame by others, insofar as they scrounge off of wealth which they themselves did not create. As von Mises asserted in his bitter diatribe at the beginning of this paper, the scarcity doctrine holds that no one has a “fair inalienable claim against all his fellow men and against society that he should get the full portion which nature has allotted to him”; no one, in other words, is entitled to more than they themselves have earned. In the same paper, Von Mises averred that “under capitalism...everybody's station in life depends on his own doing”; that anyone who loses out has simply “been tried and found wanting”; and, in so many words, that this is as it should be.²³

Immanent Abundance: The Problem with Economics

There are at least three schools of economic thought which dispute the scarcity doctrine, the first being ecological economics.²⁴ While the diagnosis of mainstream economics is that the world is intrinsically scarce, its prescription of economic growth paradoxically assumes that there are no physical limits to economic activity. Ecological economics reverses the assumption underlying the prescription, and in so doing reveals the self-fulfilling nature of the diagnosis. First and foremost, ecological economists maintain that while nature is in fact abundant, capable of sustaining universal wellbeing, it has a limited “carrying capacity”: resources can be replenished, and waste can be recycled, but only so quickly.²⁵ If the economic system exceeds this capacity - which it is bound to do so long as it insists on endless, exponential growth - it will bring about the very scarcity which it purports to solve.²⁶

²² UK Government, *Summer Budget 2015*, HC 264 105-16, paras 1.145.

²³ Von Mises, *Anti-Capitalist Mentality*, 11.

²⁴ Other schools of economics exist beside those mentioned here. For example, we have not even mentioned Austrian or Georgist economics, despite beginning the article with quotations from leaders of these schools.

²⁵ Herman Daly, *Steady State Economics*, 2nd edition (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1991).

²⁶ Jason Hickel, *Less Is More: How Degrowth Will Save the World* (London: Windmill Books, 2021).

To understand why the economic system is so pathologically dependent on economic growth, we turn to a second dissenting school, namely institutional economics. Contrary to Keynes's optimistic conjecture that "the strenuous purposeful money-makers may carry all of us along with them into the lap of economic abundance",²⁷ the iconoclastic progressivist Thorstein Veblen insisted a generation earlier that the opposite was true. Having witnessed the rise of the great American robber barons, Veblen argued that "pecuniary interests" deliberately perpetuated scarcity through advertising campaigns, industrial concentration, political influence, and other tactics.²⁸ Moreover, it was not just the profit motive which resisted the advent of abundance. Veblen observed that consumption often served not to meet material needs, or even material wants, but rather to signal one's social status - a point which Smith had celebrated.²⁹ Perversely, this gambit only works if the goods and services in question are scarce, so scarcity itself becomes the objective; and equally perversely, it is the rich who lead the rat race.³⁰ In short, economic growth never solves the problem of scarcity because it is driven by a desire, held by both consumers and producers, precisely to create scarcity.

While Veblen's analysis confirms that much of the scarcity in the modern world is artificial, we can look to another institutionalist, the late Nobel prize-winner Elinor Ostrom, for evidence that abundance can be real. Like Veblen, Ostrom held that human behaviour is far more complex - and far less dismal - than the neoclassical model of economic man. Contrary to the prediction of neoclassical economics that commonly-owned resources will be over-extracted, Ostrom studied numerous communities which sustainably manage resources such as forests, fishing pools, and even the sort of grazing lands featured in the Tragedy of the Commons.³¹ Not only did the Tragedy not transpire in these examples, but common ownership was more effective than either private ownership or state ownership: by embedding resources within community relationships, this form of ownership elicited the socially motivated patterns of behaviour which characterised pre-modern economies, escaping the clutches of economic man.

It was the Austro-Hungarian institutionalist Karl Polanyi who most thoroughly examined the transition away from those sorts of economies to the modern market system. In his seminal treatise *The Great Transformation*, Polanyi considered how primitive societies were governed by institutions of

²⁷ Keynes, *Economic Possibilities*, 198.

²⁸ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of Business Enterprise* (New York: C. Scribner, 1904).

²⁹ Thorsten Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (New York: Macmillan, 1899).

³⁰ Fred Hirsch, *The Social Limits to Growth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976).

³¹ Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

reciprocity, redistribution, and householding, which broadly ensured that everyone's needs were met.³² These institutions were all but annihilated by the Enclosure Acts, which forcibly dispossessed an entire class of the population. Although agricultural and industrial surpluses multiplied, the life of the average citizen was suddenly defined by new kinds of scarcity which she had never before experienced, forcing her to sell her labour on pain of starvation and to view the world primarily in terms of monetary value. Polanyi went on to recount how colonialists imposed a similar process on indigenous peoples, enclosing communal lands and destroying social bonds in order to impose the threat of scarcity and thus manufacture a compliant workforce. Today, we see the same processes at play in the realm of neoliberal politics.

In later work, Polanyi extended these ideas to argue that mainstream economics is essentially anachronistic in that it treats the principles of material scarcity and economic man as universals, when they are in fact specific to the market system.³³ For Polanyi, a more "substantive" economics would attempt to understand how humans meet their needs by interacting with the social and natural environment on which they depend. It is the third dissenting school, namely feminist economics, which has arguably gone the furthest in pursuing Polanyi's vision, having long proposed the concept of "provisioning" as an alternative to the market-based scarcity management of neoclassical economics.³⁴ Marilyn Power defines provisioning as a methodology which aims for a broad conception of wellbeing rather than narrow measures of economic prosperity; acknowledges the non-monetary foundations of the economy, particularly unpaid care; grounds itself on ethical values, which demand a critique of oppressive power structures; and appreciates the interdependencies of social, natural, and economic systems.³⁵ While feminist economics may appear at first glance (to men at least) to be a sectional concern, the concept of provisioning reveals strong affinities with ecological and institutional economics, along with some redemptive features of Marxism.³⁶

³² Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957 [1944]).

³³ Karl Polanyi, *The Livelihood of Man* (London: Academic Press, 1977), edited by Harry Pearson.

³⁴ Julie Nelson, "The Study of Choice or the Study of Provisioning? Gender and the Definition of Economics". In *Beyond Economic Man*, ed. Julie Nelson and Marianne Ferber (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

³⁵ Marilyn Power, "Social provisioning as a starting point for feminist economics," *Feminist Economics* 10, no. 3 (Nov 14 2008).

³⁶ In fact, Marxism cuts across all three of the heterodox schools outlined here, having inspired all of them in different ways. For example, the imperative of economic growth can be understood through Marx's analysis of capital accumulation, including the process of "primitive accumulation" through which capitalism was born and the ongoing dynamics of exploitation which keep it going. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume I* (Moscow: Progress Publishers).

All three of the dissenting schools - ecological, institutional, and feminist - thus reject the scarcity doctrine. Instead, they consider abundance to be the proper starting point of analysis, with radical implications for human behaviour and economic justice. Notice, though, that the abundance perspective does not deny the existence of scarcity. Rather it disputes that this scarcity is exogenous or fixed. The economic problem is not scarcity per se, but rather the way that scarcity is mediated and reproduced by the economic system; and the solution is not to manage or even overcome scarcity, but rather to reconfigure the system in order to foster abundance.³⁷ Abundance, in turn, is not simply the opposite or even the absence of scarcity - at least not in the impossible sense of having what Robbins called “unlimited means of gratification” - but rather a state of flourishing in which scarcity is not the defining feature of life. Crucially, the abundance perspective considers this state to be ‘immanent’ - a possibility which can be achieved in the here and now, rather than only in some promised future.

These distinctions indicate that the two views represent not just competing answers to a given set of questions, but rather alternative paradigms, which ask different questions and answer them in different ways. Despite its delusions of scientific grandeur, I have accordingly labelled one of the views as a ‘doctrine’ because it is essentially an a priori truth claim regarding the nature of the world - namely, that the world is characterised by scarcity, whether or not we want it to be. By contrast - and against von Mises’s characterisation at the beginning of this paper - the abundance perspective cannot be reduced to a set of absolute propositions. On the contrary, its key tenet is precisely that scarcity and abundance are not absolute, but rather relative and contingent. The world may be abundant for some people but scarce for others; and it may be abundant under certain conditions but scarce under others.

Indeed, the very meanings of scarcity and abundance will vary across time and space. For example, while the poor may experience a material form of scarcity whereby basic needs cannot be met, as per Malthus, the rich may experience a psychological form of scarcity resulting from social comparisons, as per Smith.³⁸ Similar variations in the ontology of scarcity likely explain why ecological, institutional, and feminist economists eschew the scarcity doctrine. Since community management systems, women’s unpaid labour, and the carrying capacity of the environment are all excluded from the market system and ignored in measures of economic activity, it is difficult to be concerned with these issues while accepting either the claim of original scarcity or the promise of man-made abundance.

³⁷ Costas Panayotakis, “Theorizing Scarcity: Neoclassical Economics and its Critics,” *Review of Radical Political Economics* 25, no. 2 (Sep 2012).

³⁸ Reda, *Prophecy, Piety, Profits*, Chapter 3.

The presence of relativity and contingency challenges the truth claim of the scarcity doctrine not only by disputing the presumption that truth can be claimed, but also by probing the distinction between claim and truth. As a social reality, the economy is constructed by prevailing ideologies, in this case the doctrine of scarcity - which is precisely why non-market phenomena are excluded from mainstream definitions of the economy. Furthermore, as a social system, the economy is capable of perpetuating itself, along with its own ideological basis.³⁹ It is certainly true that human and more-than-human modes of provisioning which fall outside of the market system face conditions of scarcity - and it is even true that these conditions can often be alleviated through commodification, be it a carbon price, an expansion of paid childcare, or good old enclosures. But this is the case only because the market system, legitimated by the doctrine of scarcity, has so profoundly infiltrated society. Thus, according to the abundance perspective, the truth claim of the scarcity doctrine gives rise to an economy which makes true that very claim.

Eating from the Magic Money Tree: Debt, Interest, and Scarcity

To test the validity of these alternative views, we can consider the topical issue of energy. At the time of writing, Western countries are facing a perfect storm which has culminated in severe shortage of oil, gas, and coal: while demand has surged following the Covid-19 pandemic, supply has dwindled thanks to an unusually cold winter followed by the war in Ukraine. This seems to have thrown the inherent scarcity of the world into sharp relief, particularly through its impact on the cost of living. Yet the Austrian theologian and social critic Ivan Illich would have advised us against this interpretation. In his 1974 book *Energy and Equity*, he made the bold argument that the historic energy shortages of his own time were not shortages at all.⁴⁰ The problem was instead that Western economies were pathologically dependent on excessive levels of energy use, with devastating consequences for inequality as well as the environment. Furthermore, Illich noted that the perception of scarcity is self-fulfilling in this respect. By blinding us to the abundance of nature, and thus to the possibility that we are using too many resources rather than too few, the scarcity doctrine encourages even higher levels of energy use.

³⁹ Niklas Luhmann, *Introduction to Systems Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).

⁴⁰ Ivan Illich, *Energy and Equity* (New York: Routledge, 1974).

While Illich's argument continues to compel, it is susceptible to a range of rebuttals, including the prospect of generating energy in more democratic and sustainable ways. If we truly want to settle the matter, we can instead turn our attention to the mystical form of energy known as money. Economists of the neoclassical variety consider money to be essentially neutral: it is simply a denominator of value which facilitates complex trade between free agents. According to this view, money acts only to *reflect* scarcity by quantifying it on a common scale, and thus to *alleviate* scarcity by unleashing the power of the market system; it has no influence on whether the goods and services to be exchanged are scarce in the first place. Keynesians dispute the neutrality of money on technical grounds by pointing to financial bubbles and economic recessions, while Marxists argue that ostensibly neutral flows of money conceal the underlying power dynamics of capitalist production. Yet the history of money demonstrates that the truth is even more strange - and even more sinister.

Money as we know it originates in the ancient institution of tithing, whereby the religious elite would demand a fixed percentage of all the produce of the land.⁴¹ Over time, as the power of kings grew and the temple establishment commingled with the palace establishment, these tithes effectively became taxes. Kings eventually required their taxes to be measured in a common unit, usually wheat or barley; in fact, modern currencies such as the shekel, the lira, and the pound were all originally devised as standards of grain to measure tithes and taxes. Money thus emerged not as a way to alleviate scarcity, but as a way to impose it: far from making it easier for people to get the things they need in exchange for the things they have, as per the fantasy of neoclassical economics, money was invented in order to create a need, namely paying taxes, which people would meet by giving up what they had.

In collaboration with the temple elite, sovereign rulers eventually outsourced the task of collecting taxes to private agents, who exploited their position by preying on those unable to pay. Tax collectors could allow a subject to defer her liability, but only if she increased it by a certain proportion. Thus was born the debt penalty known as interest - an invention which multiplied the imposition of man-made scarcity. The burden of compounding tax debts would inevitably become unbearable, at which point the tax collector would proceed to confiscate the subject's land and ultimately force her into peonage. This would frequently lead to widespread food shortages and civil unrest as a single bad

⁴¹ Randall Wray, "An irreverent overview of the history of money from the beginning of the beginning through to the present," *Journal of Post Keynesian Economics* 21, no. 4 (Summer 1999). Before this, various denominations of value existed for particular social purposes, such as paying dowry and settling blood feuds, but it may be anachronistic to describe these as 'money'.

harvest could set off a domino effect, culminating in the dispossession of the entire agricultural class.⁴² In their infinite mercy, sovereign rulers would then declare a jubilee, whereby debts would be cancelled along with the associated transfers of land and labour, until that time that the debt burden once again became unsustainable. Whereas Malthus envisaged cycles of scarcity and abundance which proceeded inexorably from the laws of population and production, the dynamics of debt were entirely man-made.

The next step in the evolution of money was to translate standards of grain into denotative tokens - what we would today recognise as money.⁴³ As these 'sovereign' coins were needed to pay taxes, civilians would acquire them from each other in exchange for goods, services, and other forms of money; and thus emerged a monetary economy. In such an economy, money acts as the primary denominator of value and the primary means of exchange. Thus, it does not merely *reflect* scarcity; rather, it *determines* the scarcity of everything else. While each price in the economy is supposed to reflect the scarcity of a certain good or service relative to other goods and services, the price system as a whole derives its meaning from the scarcity of money, since money is used to pay the prices of all goods and services. This is why in an economic depression, when money becomes scarce, everything becomes scarce even if the quantity of real resources has not decreased. Conversely, in a world where money was not scarce, even a high price would become trivial, and the price system would break down.

But money is not scarce - at least not intrinsically. After all, intrinsically, money does not exist - it consists merely of 1's and 0's on computer systems, plus bits of worthless paper and scrap metal, which we all accept as valid payment for things which do exist. In recent decades, despite a former Prime Minister's condescending defence of austerity that "there is no magic money tree", governments and central banks have been forced to reveal the dark truth at the heart of the system: if those in power truly want to, they can always create more money. Yet this supernatural ability is employed in a highly selective manner, as per the old adage: 'socialism for the rich, capitalism for the poor'.⁴⁴ In fact, the way that money is routinely created in the modern economy lays bare its artificial scarcity even more clearly: most money is created when private banks issue loans, which they do by simply adding new money to their balance sheets, spiriting it into existence like God creating the universe.⁴⁵

⁴² David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (London: Melville House, 2014).

⁴³ This move was stimulated primarily by the need for kings to efficiently feed their armies. Basically, the rulers would pay the coins to soldiers in the form of wages; the soldiers would pay the coins to peasants in exchange for food; the peasants would pay the coins to rulers to settle their taxes; and the cycle would repeat.

⁴⁴ Frances Coppola, *The Case for People's Quantitative Easing* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019).

⁴⁵ New Economics Foundation, *Where Does Money Come From?* (London: NEF, 2012).

To maintain the Malthusian sweet spot between scarcity and abundance, central banks prune the magic money tree by charging an interest rate on the ‘base’ money which banks use to pay each other, namely central bank reserves.⁴⁶ In a monetary economy, the interest rate is arguably the most important variable of all: as the price of money, it determines the scarcity of money, and therefore the scarcity of everything else. In fact, to borrow a term from the Czech economist Tomas Sedlacek, the reality (or lack thereof) is even more “spooky” than that.⁴⁷ The interest rate is not only the price of money; it is, ipso facto, the price of debt. Debt, moreover, is essentially a transfer of resources from the future to the present; so the price of debt is really the price of time. And as Sedlacek notes, the fantastical form of time travel enabled by debt and powered by interest has been super-charged since ancient times: rather than representing the temporal transfer of money from one individual to another, in a commodified economy it primarily involves society as a whole borrowing from the future, particularly the future of the planet. This is a deal with the devil; for while it facilitates economic growth, it creates an eternal dependence on the same.

Sedlacek urges us to heed the wisdom of the ancients, who warned against the dangers of eating from the magic money tree despite its promise to make us “like God”. They apparently foresaw what the current apocalypse is revealing all too starkly: the love of money, particularly manifested in the practice of interest-bearing debt, is the root of all kinds of evil. Indeed, the Bible goes so far as to personify this counterfeit love as a false god - most directly in the figure of Mammon, but also in deities which were literally worshipped, including the Canaanite god Baal, the Philistine god Baalzebub, and the Babylonian god Marduk.⁴⁸ All of these gods demanded child sacrifice (i.e. the future) in return for the promise of agricultural surplus (i.e. the present), with both sides of the bargain propping up an oppressive social system. They were, in short, false gods of a false economy, embodying a false doctrine

⁴⁶ When a bank (Bank A) creates money by issuing credit, this represents a liability to the bank, because if the customer uses that money to pay someone who uses a different bank (Bank B), Bank A is required to transfer central bank reserves to Bank B. Thus, the more money that banks create by issuing credit, the more reserves they require in order to maintain the necessary degree of liquidity. Because this comes at a cost (due to the interest rate on reserves) banks do not issue loans to anyone and everyone, even though they are technically capable of doing so. However, this constraint is weak in practice, particularly if loans can be sold on to investors as in the case of the collateralised debt obligations which were at the centre of the North Atlantic Financial Crisis of 2007-8.

⁴⁷ Tomas Sedlacek, *The Economics of Good and Evil: The Quest for Economic Meaning from Gilgamesh to Wall Street* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁴⁸ Spencer Thompson, “The Commodified Christ and the Economics of Jubilee,” *The Kenarchy Journal* 1, no. 7 (2020). Baal was later adopted as the Greek god Cronus and the Roman equivalent, Saturn.

of scarcity - the antithesis of the true God, Yahweh, whose covenant was one of provision and liberation.⁴⁹

The history of money therefore refutes the scarcity doctrine in favour of the abundance paradigm. In so doing, it reveals the theological basis of the disagreement.⁵⁰ From within the system, money appears like manna from Heaven - a divine technology which allows us to survive in a desert of scarcity. But in fact, the desert itself is a product of money, which emerged not as a provision from God, but as a payment to Him. With the invention of interest, money then began to take on a life of its own, resulting in the multiplication of scarcity - particularly for the poor.⁵¹ Ultimately, the racket became self-perpetuating, with society as a whole now in thrall to the god of growth. This language is not merely figurative: the metaphysical forces in question are most accurately described in theological terms, as they have been by critics and apologists alike since the dawn of civilisation right up until the present day.⁵² It therefore behoves us to consider the theological dimension more closely. We focus in particular on the Christian Bible, though similar conclusions can be drawn from other faiths such as Islam.⁵³

On Vineyards and Taxes: Scarcity and Abundance in the Song of Solomon

We have already seen how Malthus defended scarcity on theological grounds, positing that it was God's way of civilising the lower classes. This idea highlights an important truth: namely, that questions regarding 'the nature of nature' cannot be separated from questions regarding the nature of God.⁵⁴ But while his theories were avowedly informed by his clerical training, one would be hard-pressed to read the Bible and come to a similar conclusion as Malthus. In fact, his argument falls at the first hurdle. The opening chapter of the Bible sets out a creation myth of original abundance; and though scarcity is observed in the world, this is attributed to the fallenness of humanity rather than to God's character, design, or will. The people of God therefore trust in God's ongoing provisioning and

⁴⁹ For a contrast between the scarcity doctrine associated with Baal and the abundant provisioning of Yahweh, see Hosea 2.

⁵⁰ Roger Haydon Mitchell, *Church, Gospel, and Empire: How the Politics of Sovereignty Impregnated the West* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2011), Chapter 4.

⁵¹ We might note that the word for 'interest' in most ancient languages meant 'offspring', owing to the way that it multiplied the principal. Graeber, *Debt*, 192, 215.

⁵² Eugene McCarragher, *The Enchantments of Mammon: How Capitalism Became the Religion of Modernity* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2019).

⁵³ Ayman Reda, *Prophecy, Piety, and Profits: A Conceptual and Comparative History of Islamic Economic Thought* (New York: Springer, 2017).

⁵⁴ Romans 1:20.

look to imminent restoration of Heaven's abundance, motivating an economic ethos of wellbeing for all - particularly the poor.⁵⁵

To be fair, Malthus does not refer to the scriptures in his influential essay, which portrays God as a deistic "supreme being" rather than as Yahweh Yireh, the Provider God of the Bible. What is more, few economists today would identify as Malthusian. Yet none other than Lionel Robbins, whose definition of economics as the "science of scarcity" is widely credited as the first statement of the neoclassical version of the scarcity doctrine, directly cites the Eden story:

"We have been turned out of Paradise. We have neither eternal life nor unlimited means of gratification...Here, then, is the unity of the subject of Economic Science, the forms assumed by human behaviour in disposing of scarce means..."⁵⁶

Robbins mentions the Fall to convince us that we do not live in a world of abundance, and therefore that we should accept an economics predicated on original scarcity. The citation also assumes the ancillary doctrine of original selfishness, which finds its theological analogue in the doctrine of original sin: if human nature was ever good, it is not anymore, and our beliefs and practices should reflect this intrinsic evil.

This is a curious interpretation of Genesis. In fact, it is completely back to front. Though the duality of creation stories in chapters 1 and 2 muddies the water in some respects, the scriptures are clear that Adam and Eve originally live in a world of Heavenly abundance, which they are entrusted to steward within a loving, cooperative relationship. The *potential* for scarcity within the natural world, the social world, and indeed the spiritual world is realised only when humankind comes to believe that abundance is not enough - that is, precisely when it espouses the scarcity doctrine.⁵⁷ What is more, this epistemological turn does not stem from humankind's innate sinfulness; after all, God has already declared that humankind is not only "good" but "very good". Rather it originates in the deception of the serpent, arguably a representation of the world system. Again we see the paradoxical, self-fulfilling nature of the scarcity doctrine and the deeper truth of the abundance perspective.

These features of the story are not incidental; we are not reading too much into the text. The book of Genesis was composed not as some abstract, moralistic fable, nor as a literal, scientific account,

⁵⁵ Reda, *Prophecy, Piety, Profits*, Chapter 3.

⁵⁶ Robbins, *Essay*, 15.

⁵⁷ That this turn is primarily epistemological is reflected in the fact that the forbidden tree is named the Tree of the *Knowledge* of Good and Evil.

but rather as a forthright critique of what was possibly the first ever scarcity economy.⁵⁸ Before the Hebrews were conquered by Babylon, they existed as a loose collection of nomadic gatherers who lived in harmony with the abundance of the earth. The Babylonian empire replaced this Edenic economy with a centralised agricultural system, designed on the principles of efficiency and surplus. To the Hebrews, this experiment in playing God represented a fall from grace, inducing the same kinds of social and physical scarcity which we experience today.⁵⁹ Whereas nomadic gatherers would simply move on when a food source was temporarily depleted, intensive cultivation was susceptible to floods, famines, and plagues. Whereas primitive tribes were naturally egalitarian, agriculture gave rise to hierarchies and divisions of labour, including between men and women, with new forms of land ownership engendering new forms of exclusion. And whereas the Hebrews answered to no one but God, they now found themselves serving a foreign empire, along with its theological pantheon.

The story of the Hebrews reflects the archetypal account of the dawn of civilisation, accepted at least since Rousseau. Recent scholarship demonstrates that ancient history is more complicated than this idealised sequence would suggest, featuring repeated oscillations between a drift towards inequality on the one hand and a social consciousness which seeks to build a more equal society on the other.⁶⁰ The Biblical narrative is likely prone to similar kinds of idealisation. Yet this only makes the creation myth more compelling: rather than representing a doctrine which merely replaces the truth claim of scarcity with a truth claim of abundance, it serves to orient an alternative paradigm which has the potential to realise itself. Indeed, in many ways, the rest of the Bible is a story of (re)discovering the immanent abundance of the economy of Eden. In the Old Testament, this alternative vision of God, society, and nature is adumbrated and intimated in the Law; reviewed and advanced by the Prophets; and elucidated, mainly by negative example, through the history of Israel. In the New Testament, it is consummately revealed through Jesus Christ, radically modelled by the early Christians, and apocalyptically restored in the New Jerusalem.

Critics of this interpretation could adduce certain Biblical passages, or even entire Biblical books, which appear to endorse the scarcity doctrine. Likely candidates would be the monarchical histories and parts of the wisdom literature. I would not deny that such passages exist. However, I would argue that

⁵⁸ Wesley Howard-Brook, *Come Out My People! God's Call Out of Empire in the Bible and Beyond* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2010), Part 1.

⁵⁹ Marshall Sahlins, "The Original Affluent Society", in *Stone Age Economics* (Chicago: Aldine Atherton, 1972).

⁶⁰ David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (Milton Keynes: Allen Lane, 2021).

the role of these passages is to juxtapose two alternative theologies - what Wes Howard-Brook in his magisterial disquisition calls “the Religion of Empire” and “the Religion of Creation” - onto which the scarcity doctrine and the abundance perspective neatly map. Passages which uphold the Religion of Empire and the scarcity doctrine are critiqued and revised elsewhere within the Bible, creating a progressive arc towards the Religion of Creation and the paradigm of abundance. A Jesus hermeneutic certainly obliges such an induction: from his incarnation and resurrection, to his various miracles of multiplication, to his many teachings against an ethic of earning, owning, and owing, to his alternative vision of the Kingdom of Heaven, to his free gift of abundant life, the fact of Jesus simply cannot be squared with a doctrine of scarcity.

As this dialogue runs throughout the scriptures, expounding it in full would take us far beyond the scope of this chapter, not to mention the author's knowledge. Nevertheless, a brief homily provides us with a microcosm of the good news. Song of Songs (a.k.a. Song of Solomon) is perhaps an unlikely source from which to glean such edification, given that the book is usually interpreted as either a celebration of erotic love or as an allegory for the relationship between God on the one hand and Israel or the Church on the other. Yet the following verses, recited by the female lover in the final chapter of the book, also contain an illuminating exposition of the economy of abundance:

“Solomon had a vineyard in Baal Hamon;
he let out his vineyard to tenants.
Each was to bring for its fruit
a thousand shekels of silver.
But my own vineyard is mine to give;
the thousand shekels are for you, Solomon,
and two hundred are for those who tend its fruit.”⁶¹

The prologue of the passage sets the stage by establishing a tension between scarcity and abundance. Firstly we encounter Solomon, that great, wise king who won the admiration of the nations.⁶² Not unlike a modern politician, Solomon had a penchant for “great projects”, one of which was to plant vineyards.⁶³ In the passage, we read that one of these vineyards was located in Baal

⁶¹ Song of Songs 8:6-7, ESV.

⁶² Solomon is identified as both the author of the text and as the male protagonist, but in a historical sense it is unlikely that he was either. This is evident even in the few verses reproduced here, which refer to him in both the second and third persons.

⁶³ Ecclesiastes 2:4.

Hamon, the name of which is laden with meaning. We have already come across Baal, the agricultural fertility god which, along with related deities, represented the embodiment of the scarcity doctrine and the theological antipode of Yahweh.⁶⁴ We might additionally note that the name 'Baal' literally translates as 'master' or 'owner'. On the other hand, the word 'Hamon' denotes 'abundance'. This introduces an element of ambiguity: while the pairing is not surprising in a historic sense given that abundance was the promised reward for worshipping Baal, the Biblical narrative attests that this promise, like Baal himself, was categorically false.⁶⁵

The ensuing lines of the passage bring the drama to life. Solomon demands a thousand shekels of silver from the tenants of the vineyard, presumably signifying 'a very large quantity'. This parable - and I do think it is a parable - is touching on the very origins of money: as we saw earlier, money began precisely as the sort of tax described here. But the ambiguity continues: does Solomon charge this astronomical rent because the vineyard is so prolific, or because he is an oppressive owner who exploits his workers to make obscene profits?⁶⁶ Reflecting the relative nature of scarcity and abundance, the Biblical narrative on Solomon's kingdom indicates that the answer depends on whom we ask: from the perspective of the elite, his reign is described as one of unimaginable opulence;⁶⁷ yet after his death, when we finally hear from the people of the land, we learn that his yoke was hard, his burden heavy.⁶⁸ Indeed, Howard-Brook makes a compelling case that, just as the Book of Genesis was composed as a critique of the Babylonian empire, so too the Book of Exodus was composed as a critique of the Solomonic empire.⁶⁹ Like Pharaoh, Solomon conscripted slave labour, amassed inordinate surpluses, constructed marvellous vanities, and formed the most devastating army the world had ever seen.

It would therefore appear that Solomon the landlord was modelling a Baalite economy after all, with the production of surplus underlain by a system of extraction and exploitation. Indeed, 1 Kings tells us that Solomon actually worshipped Baal, along with other false gods.⁷⁰ The use of the vineyard as a narrative device corroborates this reading of the text: as Walter Bruggeman has postulated, the prophetic vision of peace according to which "everyone will sit under *their own* vine and under *their*

⁶⁴ Thompson, "Jubilee". In its more generic usage, '*baal*' was also used as an epithet for Yahweh.

⁶⁵ In addition to being the name of a place, 'Baal Hamon' was the name of a particularly cruel variant of the deity worshipped in Carthage, where evidence has been found of mass infanticide.

⁶⁶ These possibilities are not mutually exclusive. As Proverbs 13:23 (ESV) says: "The fallow ground of the poor would yield much food, but it is swept away through injustice."

⁶⁷ 1 Kings 1:1-11; 2 Chronicles 9:13-28.

⁶⁸ 1 Kings 12:4; 2 Chronicles 10:4.

⁶⁹ Howard-Brook, *Come Out My People*, Chapter 9.

⁷⁰ 1 Kings 11:4-11. This grave sin marred his legacy, resulting in the disunion of Israel and Judah.

own fig tree”,⁷¹ while assertedly fulfilled by Solomon as the king who “ruled over all Israel...as far as the border of Egypt”,⁷² could in fact point to the dark truth at the heart of his reign.⁷³ “But”, the female lover declares, adding a twist to the story, “my own vineyard is mine to give”. In contrast to the extractive, exploitative economy of Solomon and Baal, the economy represented here is one of generative provisioning. It is, in other words, an economy of true abundance. The lover affirms, perhaps defiantly, that Solomon can take his thousand shekels, and she will still have enough to provide for those in need.

The fact that she provides precisely two-hundred shekels for this purpose points to one of the archetypal tales of scarcity and abundance, which carries particular resonance if we accept Howard-Brook’s claim regarding the allegorisation of Solomon as Pharaoh. In Genesis chapter 41 we pick up the story of Joseph, who, having been sold into slavery by his jealous brothers, finds himself unjustly imprisoned in the land of Egypt. Joseph finally catches a break when he is called to interpret one of Pharaoh’s demented dreams. In a kind of Malthusian prophecy, Joseph’s interpretation is that there will be seven years of plenty (i.e. abundance) followed by seven years of famine (i.e. scarcity). He duly advises Pharaoh to store up grain during the abundant years in anticipation of the famine by charging a tax of one-fifth on all the produce of the land - that is, two hundred in every thousand. When the famine comes, Joseph, now promoted to chief economist, sells the grain back to the Egyptians - and also to people of other nations, including Canaan, the land of his family.

Again, the scriptures leave room for the relative and contingent nature of scarcity of abundance. On the surface, Joseph’s policy appears to be nothing but good economic management: following the basic Keynesian principle of saving during an upturn in anticipation of the downturn, Joseph’s shrewd advice prevented mass starvation. In other words, Joseph overcame the inherent scarcity of the world by amassing a surplus. But in the long term, Joseph’s strategy engendered an economy of exploitation and extraction which entailed abundance for the elite and scarcity for the masses.⁷⁴ In chapter 47, we

⁷¹ Micah 4:4, ESV; see also Zechariah 3:10.

⁷² 1 Kings 4:25.

⁷³ Walter Bruggeman, “Vineyard and Fig Tree: A Case Study in Imagination and Criticism” in *A Social Reading of the Old Testament: Prophetic Approaches to Israel’s Communal Life*, ed. Patrick Miller (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994). Jesus himself revisited the prophecy, identifying Nathaniel as an Israelite “in whom there is no deceit” after seeing him “under [his] fig tree” - to which Nathaniel, having just questioned Jesus’s unkingly birthplace, responds, “you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel” (John 1:43-50, ESV).

⁷⁴ The contrast between Joseph’s policy concerning the bread of the land (in Genesis 41) and God’s commandments concerning the manna from Heaven (in Exodus 16) are striking. In both cases there is a break in the food supply, and in both cases the response is to pre-emptively store up reserves. However, whereas in the Joseph story an earthly ruler extracts the surplus *from* the people, in the manna story the people themselves are

read that the people - including Joseph's own family - eventually run out of means to buy bread from Joseph. In lieu of payment, Joseph demands their livestock, i.e. their capital; when that is depleted he demands their land; and when even that is depleted he demands their labour - that is, he makes them slaves. As a guardian of scarcity, Joseph used the same tactic of the original moneylenders to consign his own people to years of backbreaking bondage.

After the Hebrews are liberated from Egypt some two-hundred years later, they attempt to create a new social order, based on a set of rules and rituals which would distinguish them from the scarcity-based economy of their erstwhile captors and prevent them from replicating its evils. In the book of Leviticus, where the details of this code are elaborated, Pharaoh's one-fifth tax is turned on its head. Chapter 27 stipulates that anybody who has tithed a measure of crop - such as, say, fruit from a vineyard - can redeem it adding one-fifth to its value.⁷⁵ This ordinance is apparently intended to prevent the cycles of indebtedness which led to the Egyptian captivity and which were still common - particularly given that it is elaborated shortly after the details of the Jubilee Year, which methodically reversed the seizure of money, land, and labour.

If these references are correct, or at least applicable, they imply a subversive reading of the text: the female lover, far from fawning over Solomon's power and virility, is in fact undermining the scarcity doctrine that he represents. She not only pays off his oppressive tax; she then adds one-fifth to its value, symbolically redeeming it. Significantly, though, she pays the excess not to Solomon, but to those he exploits. The workers are thus not only spared from the extortionate tithe, but they reap the interest that such tithes would generate, thus breaking the chain of debt and oppression for good. This is the sort of non-violent resistance which Jesus pioneered when he told his disciples to turn the other cheek and walk the extra mile;⁷⁶ to use Mammon to gain friends, like the shrewd manager (literally 'economist') in the parable;⁷⁷ and to give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's.⁷⁸ The

given extra provisions by God. There are also binding limits on accumulation in the latter case, as the people were only able to store up manna on the sixth day.

⁷⁵ Leviticus 27:31.

⁷⁶ Matthew 5:38-42; Luke 6:27-31; Walter Wink, *Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).

⁷⁷ Luke 16:1-13.

⁷⁸ Matthew 22:15-22; Mark 12:13-19; Luke 20:19-26.

result is an eternal Jubilee of the sort envisaged by Isaiah and fulfilled by Jesus, in which debts are cancelled, the oppressed are set free, and workers of vineyards receive “the wealth of nations”.⁷⁹

The Lover apparently acquires her means from the abundance of “[her] own vineyard”, but this reference remains a mystical one.⁸⁰ For example, does it signify that there is a separate vineyard which she legally owns; that Solomon’s vineyard in fact belongs to her in some deeper sense; or that she is the voice of Provider God, who ultimately owns everything - which, given that God is always emptying God’s self of power, is to say that nothing is ever really owned?⁸¹ Solomon’s claim to lordship is vitiated in any case, but the last possibility seems the most likely. In the first place, by invoking the Levitical code, the cheek-turning interest payment seems to carry the message that everything belongs to God: “Every tithe of the land, whether of the seed of the land or of the fruit of the trees, is the Lord’s; it is holy to the Lord. If a man wishes to redeem some of his tithe, he shall add a fifth to it.”⁸²

More significantly, the Lover’s vineyard is Hers “to give”; its entire purpose is to be gifted. Contrast this with the story of Naboth’s vineyard, which the wicked King Ahab, a man after Solomon’s own heart, falsely believes is his to take. “Give me your vineyard,” Ahab commands Naboth, “...or, if it seems good to you, I will give you its value in money.”⁸³ In accordance with the prebendal system of land use codified in the Jubilee, Naboth’s response is essentially that the vineyard is *not* his own to give/sell, let alone Ahab’s to take/buy, for his family is only granted permission to use it by God: “[Yahweh] forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers.”⁸⁴ Ahab’s wife Jezebel, the Phoenician priestess of Baal, hence vows to her husband, “I will give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite.”⁸⁵ This she does by arranging for Naboth to be stoned to death - a Solomonic pattern of violent conquest which exhibits the diametric opposite of the self-giving Love of God.

⁷⁹ Isaiah 61:1-6; Matthew 20:1-13; Luke 4:1-30. It is interesting that Smith’s famous phrase originates (or at least was anticipated) in a passage which promises that the “wealth of nations” will follow from the fulfilment of the Jubilee, with specific reference to vineyards. Equally interesting, and probably without coincidence, is that John Ruskin’s most well-known work on political economy, *Unto This Last*, is also a Biblical reference to vineyard workers - namely those in Jesus’s parable who receive the same wages as everyone else despite showing up at the eleventh hour.

⁸⁰ Ellen Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 174-175.

⁸¹ Stephen Rusk, ‘The Politics of Gift’, in Roger Mitchell and Julie Tomlin, eds., *Discovering Kenarchy: Contemporary Resources for the Politics of Love* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2014), Chapter 5.

⁸² Leviticus 27:30-31.

⁸³ 1 Kings 21:2, ESV.

⁸⁴ 1 Kings 21:3, ESV.

⁸⁵ 1 Kings 21:7, ESV.

The Female Lover speaks of this Love immediately before she models it in the parable of the vineyard:

“...love is strong as death,
jealousy is fierce as the grave.
Its flashes are flashes of fire,
the very flame of [Yah].
Many waters cannot quench love,
neither can floods drown it.
If a man offered for love
all the wealth of his house,
he would be utterly despised.”⁸⁶

The proverb of someone refusing to accept monetary wealth for something which is too sacred to sell echoes the story of Naboth. Although the Song of Songs was likely written much earlier than the books of Kings, the description of Love as the “flame of [Yah]” which cannot be extinguished by “many waters” reinforces the parallels between the texts.⁸⁷ Shortly before Naboth is killed, the prophet Elijah summons fire from Heaven to consume an altar which he has doused with water, demonstrating the supremacy of Yahweh over Baal.⁸⁸ As Jesus would later instruct his disciples, the Love of God which we read about in the Song is the key to this text, unlocking the abundance which is otherwise constrained by Elijah’s own violence.⁸⁹ Given that the narrator plays the role of Lover, this substantiates the notion that she is at least channelling the voice of God. In fact, the allusion to *Yah* is the only direct reference to God in the entire Song, although admittedly it remains ambiguous as the phrase could merely serve as an emphatic suffix, as in the NIV translation, “a mighty flame”.⁹⁰ Whereas Solomon’s economy of scarcity serves the false love of money as represented by the false god Baal, the Lover’s economy of abundance manifests the true Love of God.

⁸⁶ Songs of Songs 8:7b, ESV.

⁸⁷ Patrick Hunt, *Poetry in the Song of Songs: A Literary Analysis* (New York: Peter Laing, 2008), 241.

⁸⁸ 1 Kings 18.

⁸⁹ Luke 9:51-55.

⁹⁰ D. Winton Thomas, “A Consideration of Some Unusual Ways of Expressing the Superlative in Hebrew”, *Vetus Testamentum* 3 (1953), 209-224.

There Is No Wealth But Life: Towards an Economics of Love

The centrality of Love presents a challenge to modern economics, heterodox as well as orthodox. Most obviously, the loveless ‘economic man’ of neoclassical economics is exposed as at best a symptom of a scarcity-based economy and at worst a post-hoc justification of the same. But perhaps it also implies that acting in accordance with Love could open the door to a radically different world.⁹¹ If the temporal limits of the world are transformed into scarcity when viewed from the perspective of economic man - first subjectively, then objectively, as per the self-fulfilling nature of the scarcity doctrine - then the opposite might be true if we instead choose to imitate the female Lover. This is implicit in a long line of thinking from Aristotle to the Church Fathers, who believed that the path to abundance lay in sharing our possessions and moderating our desires rather than accumulating more resources.⁹²

Scarcity-based critics of neoclassical economics, in particular the traditions of Marx and Keynes, deny the power of Love because they reverse the order of this transformation. Both of these thinkers looked forward to an age of abundance, when Love would finally be allowed to flourish; but only after we had first endured an age of scarcity.⁹³ This dualistic eschatology fails to apprehend that Love itself is needed to realise abundance, which is already immanent in the world. Perhaps this is what Jesus meant when he said that the Kingdom of Heaven is in our midst.⁹⁴ In fact, Keynes alludes to the Kingdom, particularly Jesus’s description of it in the Sermon to the Mount: according to Keynes, a moral revolution will follow the advent of abundance, with the love of money finally ceding its throne. “But beware!” he duly warns us, channelling his inner prophet. “The time for all this is not yet. For at least another hundred years we must pretend to ourselves and to everyone that fair is foul and foul is fair...Avarice and usury and precaution must be our gods for a little longer still. For only they can lead us out of the tunnel of economic necessity into daylight.”⁹⁵ This “Faustian bargain” follows the deceptive promise of Baal and Solomon, not the radical path of Jesus and the Lover.⁹⁶

⁹¹ Geoffrey Hodgson, *From Pleasure Machines to Moral Communities: An Evolutionary Economics without Homo Economicus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), x.

⁹² Reda, *Prophecy, Piety, Profits*, Parts 1 and 2. Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7 can be interpreted along these lines. See also 1 Timothy 6:6-10.

⁹³ Jim Peach and M. William Dugger, “An Intellectual History of Abundance”, *Journal of Economic Issues* 40 no. 3 (Sep 2006), 693–706.

⁹⁴ Luke 17:21.

⁹⁵ Keynes, *Economic Possibilities*, 201.

⁹⁶ Robert Skidelsky and Edward Skidelsky, *How Much Is Enough? Money and the Good Life* (New York: Other Press, 2013), 68.

The matter is arguably even graver when we turn to Marxism. Like Keynes, Marx predicted that a social order approximating Love would eventually emerge, but only after capitalism had established the material preconditions for abundance.⁹⁷ For Marx, this was the necessary endpoint of a historical process of class conflict, with no guarantee that the transition to socialism will be any less violent than the emergence of capitalism. Such a deterministic view would have us either tolerate the scarcities produced by capitalism in passive expectation of the age of abundance, or replace them with a totalising ideology which, historically, has only reconfigured the underlying structures of domination and oppression. Without Love, Marxism therefore remains wedded to a scarcity view of the world, in which competing groups engage in a zero-sum power struggle, and the ends justify the means. Such an ideology is incapable of delivering on its promise of abundance.

An instructive example can be found in the Marxist theory of social reproduction. Marx's ideas on this topic were developed more thoroughly by his comrade Friedrich Engels, who claimed that "[t]he modern individual family is based on the open or disguised enslavement of woman: and modern society is the mass composed solely of individual families as its molecules."⁹⁸ This dismal view of the relationship between men and women, anticipated in the *Communist Manifesto*, undoubtedly carries a grain of truth. In our own Song of Songs passage, the Lover distinguishes herself from two archetypes of patriarchal tyranny: Solomon, who was notorious for treating women as objects of accumulation; and Baal, whose name designates "the owner of things, including slaves and women".⁹⁹ It is noteworthy that Solomon was said to have precisely one-thousand wives and concubines - the very number of shekels which he demands of his tenants - even if this number only signifies 'a very large quantity', and even if this is only a literary device intended to emphasise his virility. In fact, according to one tradition, Song of Songs was written by members of Solomon's harem, underlining the subversive nature of the text.

Yet without Love, Marx and Engels are unable to envisage a form of family life which is not based on domination. Their solution is therefore to simply abolish the family, an outcome which according to them would naturally follow from the abolition of capital.¹⁰⁰ This represents the inverse of our Song of Songs passage - and the Bible in general - in which a social, economic, and theological

⁹⁷ Julie Matthaei, "Rethinking Scarcity: Neoclassicism, Neo-Malthusian, and Neo-Marxist", *Review of Radical Political Economics* 16, no. 2-3 (June 1984), 81-94.

⁹⁸ Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (marxists.org, 2000 [1884]), Part II, Chapter 4.

⁹⁹ Christian Wolf, "Lord," in *Holmon's Bible Dictionary*, available at <https://www.studylight.org/dictionaries/hbd/l/lord.html>.

¹⁰⁰ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* (marxists.org, 200 [1848]), Chapter 2.

critique is embedded within a declaration of the pre-eminence of Love.¹⁰¹ It seems germane that Song of Songs is traditionally read on the Sabbath of Passover week. In Jewish mysticism, the Sabbath is depicted as a distinctly feminine Spirit which embodies the presence of God on earth in the form of a bride.¹⁰² As already intimated, the Sabbath, along with the derivative institution of Jubilee, is the Biblical hallmark of the abundance economy: it represents a subversive refusal to participate in the accumulation and exploitation of scarcity economics, along with a prophetic demonstration of an alternative model based on provisioning and sufficiency. It is surely no coincidence that Jesus inaugurated his ministry by proclaiming the arrival of an everlasting Jubilee.¹⁰³

Within the abundance schools, Love is an untapped wellspring - it is already there under the surface, particularly in the emphasis on other-oriented motivations and non-market relations, but is rarely made explicit or embraced as a guiding concept.¹⁰⁴ As a result, all of these schools have a tendency to stray into the pitfalls of Marxism, with ecological economists additionally prone to the fatalistic misanthropy of Malthus. To escape the clutches of the scarcity doctrine, we can look to the Victorian polymath John Ruskin - a significant precursor, if not the father, of heterodox economics. Ruskin's vision of the world was one of sacramental abundance, in keeping with the Romantic poets who inspired him.¹⁰⁵ Accordingly, he was unwilling to accept the scarcities of capitalism in return for its surpluses, even as a temporary compromise. In his influential tract *Unto This Last*, he coined a memorable apothegm which summarises his philosophy: "THERE IS NO WEALTH BUT LIFE - life, with all its powers of love, of joy, and of admiration."¹⁰⁶ Under this definition, the economic system defended by Adam Smith and the other Classical economists delivered not wealth, but its opposite - what Ruskin called "illth". More than any other thinker, Ruskin appreciated that fighting scarcity with scarcity is simply false economy.

Conclusion: Free Lunch for All

¹⁰¹ Ephesians 5:25.

¹⁰² Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), Chapter 5.

¹⁰³ Luke 4.

¹⁰⁴ For a notable exception, see Kenneth Boulding, *The Economy of Love and Fear* (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1973).

¹⁰⁵ McCarragher, *Enchantments of Mammon*, Chapter 3.

¹⁰⁶ John Ruskin, *Unto This Last and Other Writings* (London: Penguin Books, 2005 [1862]), 222, emphasis in original. See also 1 Timothy 6:6-19.

“There is no such thing as a free lunch.” This smug, moralistic maxim sums up the scarcity doctrine at the heart of mainstream economics. The neoclassical zealot Milton Friedman even titled a book after it, like a modern-day Scrooge revelling in his self-given duty of ensuring that nobody gets any more than they deserve.¹⁰⁷ Unfortunately for mainstream economics, God seems to be fairly fond of a free lunch, at least judging by the Bible. From the very first chapter to the very last, the scriptures expose the false god of the scarcity doctrine and proclaim an alternative economy of true abundance. Is not the core message of Christianity that abundant life through Jesus is a free gift, not the product of our work?¹⁰⁸

Jesus, of course, also provided a literal free lunch to thousands of people - on two occasions, no less.¹⁰⁹ Besides exemplifying the abundance perspective - which in fact permeates the whole of the Gospels - these particular miracles demonstrate that there remains a role for economics. The disciples initially revert to scarcity management: the crowds must be dismissed to purchase their own food, for there simply is not enough to go round. Jesus refutes the false doctrine underlying this kind of economics by multiplying the loaves and the fishes. Yet it is also the disciples who go on to distribute the abundance, ensuring that everyone is satisfied; and it is the disciples who go on to collect the leftover pieces, ensuring that nothing is wasted. This encapsulates the proper role of economics: not to manage scarcity, but to provision abundance; not to forge wealth, but to channel its natural flow.¹¹⁰

The pragmatic reader may still harbour doubts. In the real world, surely we do face trade-offs, and surely we ignore them to the detriment of all. We can consider this objection - which cannot be dismissed out of hand - by recalling the story of a woman who empties a jar of expensive perfume onto Jesus.¹¹¹ “Why this waste?” the onlookers expostulate, “[f]or this could have been sold for a large sum and given to the poor”.¹¹² John’s account, which specifies that the questioner is the money-loving Judas

¹⁰⁷ Milton Friedman, *There’s No Such Thing as a Free Lunch: Essays in Public Policy* (Chicago: Open Court, 1975).

¹⁰⁸ Ephesians 2:8.

¹⁰⁹ Matthew 14, Matthew 15.

¹¹⁰ Barrera, *Evil of Scarcity*, 105.

¹¹¹ Details of this story vary across all four Gospels, including the location of the event (Simon the Leper’s house in Matthew and Mark, Simon the Pharisee’s house in Luke, Lazarus’s house in John), the identity of the woman (simply “a woman” in Matthew and Mark, a “sinful” woman in Luke, and Martha in John), the target of her perfume (Jesus’s head in Matthew and Mark, his feet in Luke and John), the identity of the questioners (the disciples in Matthew, “some of those present” in Mark, Simon the Pharisee in Luke, and Judas Iscariot in John), and the object of their protest (the woman wasting the perfume in Matthew, Mark, and John, Jesus allowing a sinner to touch him in Luke). The chronological location of the event also varies. Matthew 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9; Luke 7:36-50; John 12:1-8.

¹¹² Matthew 26:8b-9, ESV.

Iscairiot whose true motivation is to embezzle the proceeds, invites us to think critically about such opportunity costs in light of the relative and contingent nature of scarcity and abundance.¹¹³ Contrary to the spurious objectivity of economic ‘science’, trade-offs do not appear from on high like natural laws, and therefore cannot be reduced to technical questions of efficiency; rather, the menu of possible options is fixed in the interests of those who already enjoy material abundance, at the expense of those who do not. The result is that even sensible, well-meaning choices are channelled into a system which ultimately exacerbates social and physical scarcity. Perhaps we do face trade-offs in the ‘real world’; but, to paraphrase Karl Marx, perhaps the point is to change the world.¹¹⁴

That certainly seems to be the thrust of Jesus’s answer to the question, along with the parable of debt forgiveness which he relates in Luke’s account. “You will always have the poor among you,” he instructs the audience, “but you will not always have me.”¹¹⁵ This statement is initially disconcerting, especially given its apparent incongruence with Jesus’s proclamation of good news to the poor through the fulfilment of the Jubilee. But in fact, Jesus is quoting from none other than Deuteronomy 15, which enumerates the regulations of the Sabbath Year, particularly concerning the cancellation of debt. While the source does state that “[t]here will never cease to be poor in the land”, some seven verses earlier it affirms that, on the contrary, “[t]here will be no poor among you”.¹¹⁶ This apparent contradiction illustrates the contingency of scarcity and abundance, along with their respective consequences for economic justice. By citing this passage, Jesus is signalling that universal wellbeing requires a radical shift to an economy of abundance, not just the efficient management of scarcity. That in turn requires us to follow the example of the woman who empties out her perfume, along with that of the Lover who gives away her vineyard, as both manifest the self-emptying, self-giving Love of Christ.¹¹⁷

And so we are back to Genesis. Scarcity and abundance are caught up in a kind of quantum-physical dynamic, whereby both exist simultaneously until we decide to eat from one tree or another - and the consequences of this choice are nothing short of life and death, blessing and curse. That is the true trade-off. At one level, the choice has already been made: we are living at a time when the scarcity

¹¹³ In Matthew’s account, Judas agrees to betray Jesus for thirty shekels of silver shortly after this event. In Mark’s account, the event is followed by the Last Supper, at which Jesus predicts Judas’s betrayal.

¹¹⁴ Karl Marx, *Theses On Feuerbach* (Marxists.org, 2002 [1938]).

¹¹⁵ Matthew 26:11, ESV.

¹¹⁶ Deuteronomy 15:4,11, ESV.

¹¹⁷ Luke’s (7:36-50) account emphasises the woman’s love more than the other three gospels. Compare this passage from the beginning of Song of Songs (1:2b-3, ESV): “...your love is more delightful than wine. Pleasing is the fragrance of your perfumes; your name is like perfume poured out.”

doctrine has so firmly embedded itself within the fabric of our society that it seems impossible to escape. Yet our passage from the Song of Solomon should give us hope that another way - the way of Love - is always possible.

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