

# Old Testament offers relevant critique of economic injustice, Brueggemann says

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ABILENE—Ancient Hebrew Scriptures offer American Christians a critique of the prevailing economic system, Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann told a chapel assembly at Hardin-Simmons University's Logsdon School of Theology.

"The Old Testament should not go away, because it provides a script whereby we may think honestly and faithfully about economic questions," he said.



Walter Brueggemann delivered the George Knight Lectures at Hardin-Simmons University. (HSU Photo) Brueggemann presented his economic reading of the Old Testament narrative as part of the George Knight Lectures at Hardin-Simmons University.

The Bible grew out of the context of economies of extraction—systems in which powerful people extract their wealth from vulnerable people, he said.

"The Bible offers a sustained critique of the economy of extraction and

consistently offers an alternative that is an evangelical option,” Brueggemann said. “We in the Western world—and in the United States—live in an economy of extraction.”

Speaking on the eve of the national election, Brueggemann noted much of the rhetoric in the presidential campaigns centered on “the economy of extraction and who does it better.”

### **Case studies from the Old Testament**

Brueggemann cited three case studies in the Old Testament that demonstrated how the economy of extraction led to neighborly alternative visions.

- **Pharaoh.** Egyptian oppression of the Hebrews began when Joseph interpreted Pharaoh’s dream, which was a “nightmare of scarcity,” and that led to a policy of property confiscation, a food monopoly and slavery, he noted.

“It is so ironic that people with the most have the greatest anxiety about running out and not having enough,” he said.

Brueggemann interpreted the Exodus as a critical response to an extraction economy.

“It’s a map of social analysis” and a critical critique of any extraction economy, he said, applying it to “the oligarchy in which we live that is busy extracting wealth from vulnerable people by taxes and mortgage and interest and debt regulation and low wages.”

The Exodus involved the people of Israel leaving Egypt to go into the wilderness—“territory beyond the reach of Pharaoh”—where they saw no viable means of life support, he noted. However, the miraculous provision of manna, quail and water showed how “the wilderness turns out to be a

place of abundance,” he said.

“This is the core claim of the gospel, that as long as we live in the extractive economy of Pharaoh, we will live in an economy of anxious scarcity,” he said. “Whenever we have courage and freedom to imagine ourselves outside the Pharaoh’s domain, we discover it is a zone of abundance where the great God governs.”

Brueggemann also interpreted the Ten Commandments as rules for living outside the domain of Pharaoh and his economy. He particularly singled out the command to observe Sabbath and the command forbidding covetousness of anything belonging to a neighbor.

“The extraction economy wants us to be endlessly busy, because busy people do not have the time to reflect,” he said. “The extraction economy covets everything from everybody.”

- **Solomon.** Solomon gained gold by dealing arms to other nations, compelling cheap labor and implementing an exorbitant tax system to support his lavish monarchy, Brueggemann said.

“Solomon was a big extractor,” he said, comparing Solomon’s temple to Trump Tower in terms of its significance as a symbol of personal wealth.

However, the injustice perpetrated by the small, wealthy cluster of leaders in Jewish society led to a tax revolt after Solomon’s death, he noted.

Eventually, it led to Old Testament prophets who pronounced judgment on an unsustainable economic system and presented an alternative vision—a message relevant to the United States today, Brueggemann said.

“We are now facing up to the first hints that the extraction system in the United States is no longer sustainable,” he said.

- **Persian empire.** Persia extracted taxes from the Jews and used their

countrymen as the means of extraction.

“The purpose of every empire is to collect revenue,” he said. “The way it worked is that the Persian empire hired local Jews to collect taxes from other Jews to send to Persia.”

The prayer of Ezra recorded in Nehemiah ends on a note of great distress caused by the extraction system, Brueggemann noted. Eventually, Nehemiah compelled the tax-collecting Jews and the tax-paying Jews into a covenant to remember they were Jews.

### **Neighborly alternatives to the extraction economy**

Scripture offers an extended report on extraction economies and proposals for alternatives, Brueggemann said.

“Marvel at what has been entrusted to us—how hard it is and how wonderful it is,” he said. “What has been entrusted to us is the vision, the opportunity and the vocation that the neighborhood can be organized differently.”

In contrast to the normative extraction economy so prevalent in the world, God’s people are summoned to seek and to exercise alternatives based on grace and gratitude, he asserted.

“The normative economy is to be resentful if anybody gets something for nothing,” he said. “In the alternative neighborhood economy, we understand what we have is a gift that is properly shared. It is a dangerous, subversive alternative, and it is the truth of our life.”

### **Psalms as the offer of a ‘counter-world’**

In a second lecture, Brueggemann explored the Psalms as the offer of a counter-world unlike the world in which people live today.

In the present world, people are anxious about scarcity and propelled by an ideology of greed, he observed. Self-sufficiency is prized, people are seduced into denying the truth about themselves, and the end is despair, he said.

“People have a willful amnesia because there are too many things we do not want to remember,” he said.

Finally, he observed, the world people recognize is normless—“no norms of civility or neighborliness.”

The counter-world of the Psalms affirms trustful fidelity, celebrates a world of abundance that God the Creator provides, depends upon God and “is all about truth-telling,” he said. It offers hope instead of despair, remembrance in place of forgetting and celebrates the norms—the law—God provides for the good of his creation, he added.

In place of the idolatries of this world, the Psalms focus on the God of abundance and generosity—the One who is reliable, truthful and trustworthy to keep his promises, he said.

“God remembers. He has not forgotten who we are,” Brueggemann said. Because humanity is made of dust but carrying God’s image, God gives his people norms by which they should live.

“The commandments are the path to life,” he said. “They remind us we are penultimate, and we need to get in sync with the Ultimate. The Psalms offer a script for those who reject the foolishness of this world.”