

Economic Egalitarianism in Pre-monarchical Israel

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Abstract: *The claim that egalitarian tendencies are integral to Judeo-Christian belief has a lengthy pedigree. It continues to be advocated by Christians who employ diverse understandings of the term “egalitarian” (as per Forrester, 2001, and Bauckham, 2003). This paper confines itself to ideas of economic egalitarianism, as defined, and asks to what extent they are reflected in aspects of the Mosaic Law, including the initial land distributions to Israel, and the Jubilee. The conclusion is that certain economic egalitarian tendencies are reflected in the Mosaic Law, even though those tendencies are not equivalent to all contemporary understandings of economic egalitarianism. Some Christian critics, like Calvin Beisner (1988, 1997), deny that the initial land distributions and the Jubilee reflect economic egalitarian qualities. His arguments are evaluated, and found to be inconclusive; neither do they undermine the existence of economically egalitarian qualities in other aspects of the Mosaic Law. JEL: A13, Z10, Z12. Key words: Mosaic Law, egalitarian, land allocation.*

In this paper we assess how far biblical texts containing the Mosaic Law (Ex. 20-23; Deut. 4-31; Lev. 17-26), including the initial land distributions to Israel on entering the Promised Land and the Jubilee, exhibit normative economic egalitarian trajectories. We conclude that interpretation of the Law texts confirms the presence of particular economically egalitarian tendencies, even though no single meaning of egalitarianism emerges from the texts. The egalitarian principles are predicated on understandings of egalitarianism that differ between texts. Section one reviews the different understandings of the term “egalitarian” in intra-Christian debates. Parallels with secular deliberations on egalitarianism and problems contained in these discussions are noted. Also established is a definition of economic egalitarianism that is applied to the Mosaic Law in section two. Section three addresses the claim,

made in Beisner (1988, 1997), that the initial distribution of land in pre-Monarchical Israel was not egalitarian.

1 Introduction

The terms “equality” and “egalitarian” are employed in the intra-scriptural discussion without a common or consistent meaning. No single definition of the term is used in the debate overall. One scriptural meaning of equality, promoted by Forrester (2001), is that each person is of infinite worth and needs to be treated as such, “independently of their ability, contribution, success, work, or desert” (pp. 30-31). Bauckham (2002) discerns a narrower biblical meaning of “egalitarian:” that no person is “entitled to status and privilege above others” (p. 116). These two definitions of equality need not conflict. For example, God regards each person as worthy of equal love, but this form of equality could coexist with status differentials in a Christian institution such as a church. In contrast, Elliott (2002, p. 76) places these two meanings in conflict; in his understanding, egalitarianism demands the elimination of status, rank, position, control, and power relationships. The economic aspects of equality are also highlighted by Forrester (2001) and Bauckham (2002), and are the specific concern of Beisner (1988, pp. 57-73; 1997, pp. 51-52), particularly the distribution of wealth, as manifested, for example, in the Mosaic Law. In like vein, Grudem (2003) focuses on material possessions in assessing equality, arguing that while “some inequality of possessions is fundamentally good,” “some extreme inequalities are wrong in themselves” (p. 51). This is a qualified form of economic egalitarianism. A further complication is that particular understandings of “egalitarian” are expanded from a specific context to an all-embracing application. Thus, while Elliott (2002) relies on status-related definitions of egalitarianism, he encompasses matters of economic disparity and poverty in his egalitarian fold without explaining how these relate to status issues.

The secular literature has long pointed out that equality can be constituted by diverse attributes, so that no single definition of egalitarian is able to characterize all its qualities (Marger, 2002). For instance, equality of opportunity in some attribute, such as education, might be offered as a criterion for “egalitarian,” but so could equality of outcome. The characteristics specifying each of these states may be contrary to the other. A society may embody equality of opportunity, but because of differing human propensities and life events, unequal outcomes will result. These differing propensities could express themselves via the “natural inequalities” people face, due to differences in ability, diligence,

and chance. To ascribe meaning to an advocacy of greater equality would depend on what is to be equalized—moral worth, status, privilege, resources, welfare, etc. People can be regarded as having equal moral worth (each entitled to comparable respect, etc.) even while inequalities exist between them in access to resources. A further problem is how states of equality might be measured, even if any particular criterion of equality, such as moral worth, were the goal. A variety of approaches can be taken to measure seemingly constrained variables relating to equality, such as those of interest to economics, like income and wealth (Schneider, 2004).

One problem inherent to understanding equality, therefore, is definitional. Thus, Nagel (1995) suggests that given “complete equality among persons being impossible, the real meaning of the idea is reduction or amelioration of inequality” (p. 248). This specification characterizes egalitarian as the amelioration of its opposite, without defining either polarity. Other secular discussions of “egalitarianism” do not provide a definition of egalitarian or equality that can be followed consistently (e.g., Walzer, 2004). One summary of the secular debate is that “there is no agreed answer to the question in what respect should people be judged more or less equal,” a judgment applying also “to the question of measurement” (Miller, 1999, pp. 249-250). No single meaning of “egalitarian” is able to capture all of the dimensions of equality across the various arenas in which it applied. That is, “there are multiple dimensions to inequality” (Osberg, 2001, p. 7376). The indeterminacy occurs because “equality” and “inequality” are socially constructed terms, not natural kinds. In assessing equality, therefore, we must focus on a few aspects of the phenomenon.

In recent Christian discussion on the pre-monarchical implications of the Mosaic Law (Wright, 1995; Mason, 1996; Mott & Sider, 1999; Beed & Beed, 2006; Sider, 2007; Van Til, 2007), the Law has been interpreted as promoting more equal distributions of wealth and income between Israelite families (and others in the society) than would occur without the Law, and compared to distributions that existed in other contemporary ancient Near East societies. These commentators admit that ancient Israel embodied non-egalitarian structures as well—patriarchy within the extended family, unequal rights for resident aliens, and the use of slavery. Nevertheless, the authors have used their interpretations to advocate for the continuing applicability of the principle. Their general case is that wealth and income should be distributed more evenly than they are currently, not that some flat equal arithmetical distribution should be sought. At the least, the basic material needs of each person should be met, preferably via remunerated work rather than through government-overseen redistribution. Beyond

that, wide (unquantified) disparities in the distribution of wealth and income are unacceptable. Blomberg (1999, p. 245) calls this the principle of moderation. The modern extension of this argument is that adequate wealth/income is such a good thing that each person and family requires sufficient levels to participate fully in the social, economic, and religious life of the community in which they live. In ancient Israel, owning land (except for the Levites) was the necessary and sufficient condition for participating fully in Israelite society.

This understanding of economic egalitarianism can be related also to the scriptural analysis of Graafland (2008, pp. 3-4). He identifies a needs principle, closely associated with the capability principle of Sen. All households should receive what they need to participate fully in the life of their community in exchange for contributing according to their ability. The capabilities of all people are to be optimized, but inequalities may persist. The argument below suggests that the Mosaic Law's effects in the aggregate would be similar to effects of the needs and capability principles. The Mosaic Law overall sought to reduce unequal outcomes between extended families (and other persons), preserve equal opportunities, and allow the basic needs of people to be met. It did not seek to generate totally equal outcomes. The term "economic egalitarian" is used below in the sense of one or more of these three aims being pursued—generating more equal outcomes, preserving equal opportunity, and ensuring that basic needs of people were met. Not every element of the Mosaic Law's economic provisions embodied each of these three aims with the same force, or was directed at the same recipients.

2 Economic Egalitarian Tendencies in Land Allocations and in the Mosaic Law

On entering the Promised Land, the book of Numbers suggests the land was allocated by God to the tribes of Israel on criteria that embodied elements of equal opportunity and outcome, and of meeting the economic needs of each Israelite family. Num. 26:54 instructed that "to a large tribe you shall give a large inheritance, and to a small tribe you shall give a small inheritance," with the word "tribe" becoming "clan" in Num. 33:54 (and "family" in the New English Bible). The territories allocated to each of these groups were determined by lot, as were the location of the land plots for farming to the heads of extended families within the territories (Num. 26:55-56, 33:54). Since area was proportional to tribe/clan/family population, "the principle of distribution was equitable," as was the allocation by lot, held to reflect God's determination (Harrison,

1990, pp. 349-350). Equi-proportional principles governed the area, if not the fertility, of land allocated to each household head. A consensus of biblical exegetes, such as Milgrom (1990), Harrison (1990), Ashley (1993), and Sakenfeld (1995), agrees broadly with the above depiction. This is expressed by Milgrom (1990): “the location of the tribal territory is determined by lot, but the size of the tribe’s territory is a function of the tribe’s census count” (p. 227). However, there is a problem with the other text that describes the initial land allocations, Josh. 13-21. Here the land areas are not proportional to tribe, clan, or family size, but are distributed by lot only. Economic egalitarian tendencies might not be operative in this scenario. On the other hand, they could be, for the outcome of the lots was seen as representing God’s will. Perhaps individual farm sizes were more or less proportional in area to family size within the region allocated to each tribe (even though its location was determined by lot), but no clue is provided in the Joshua texts that this was so. In the next section, discrepancies between the Numbers and the Joshua formulations are examined more fully.

Commentators (as distinct from exegetes) also discern economically egalitarian elements in the initial land distribution. Land areas were proportional to tribe populations, and farm sizes were approximately equal, but not in fertility (Schaefer & Noell, 2005, pp. 3, 6). Similarly, Mott and Sider (1999) claim that “the criterion of the division was thus equality” (p. 34), and they maintain this extended to the time of the Judges when the society was made up of “small land holdings of equal size,” “a relatively egalitarian society of small landowners” (p. 35). Archaeological evidence backs this view: “in the early days of settlement ... excavations in Israelite towns bear witness to this equality in standards of living.” These “towns” were little more than clusters of extended farming families of the same clan, but for one excavation, houses were “all of the same size and arrangement,” and families “lived in the same way as its neighbours” (de Vaux, 1967, pp. 72-73). This rough equality on the same site had disappeared by the eighth century BC. Wenham (1979) makes a similar point, that “standards of house-building have lead archaeologists to conclude that early Israel was a relatively egalitarian society” (p. 317). In sum, “with a few exceptions ... the archaeological record indicates that the socioeconomic relations of the Iron Age I villagers was relatively egalitarian” (McNutt, 1999, p. 72). This might not be surprising, since “most members of the Israelite league were drawn from the lowest and most abused strata of society and were desperately poor,” descendants of state slaves in Egypt (Bright, 2000, p. 177).

As far as the biblical texts are concerned, differences in fertility of the land allocations would not be a problem. Time and again, God promised that economic welfare would be optimized only if all the regulations of the Mosaic Law were followed (e.g., Deut. 8). In this case, bad seasons would not occur, and God by His supernatural action would render them irrelevant. On these lines, Schneider (2002, pp. 67) is right to claim that “the pronounced theme of affluence in the literature that is linked with the exodus” is highly important, that God’s purpose in bringing the Israelites to the Promised Land “was to place them in conditions where they might be free to cultivate a spirituality and materiality of true dominion and delight” (p. 73).

The benefits of farmland allocation did not extend to all members of the Israelite community. Resident aliens and Levites received no share, although the Levites were granted towns and pastureland. It is sometimes claimed that Israelite orphans and widows also would have been disadvantaged

Table 1: Nets in the Mosaic Law

1. Free food gathered from other farms at any time; gleanings freely available to the poor.
2. A produce tax available to the poor every third year.
3. Every seven years, land fallow, its produce freely available to the poor (the Sabbatical Year).
4. Loans required from the well-off to the poor.
5. Limits placed on the collateral the poor were to offer for a loan.
6. Loans interest-free to Israelites.
7. Outstanding balance of a loan cancelled every seven years (the Sabbatical Year).
8. Land reverts to original holders at maximum every forty-nine years (the Jubilee).
9. Fallback provisions, such as bond-servitude, available to the struggling poor.

Source: Exodus 20-23; Deuteronomy 4-31; Leviticus 17-26.

in the land allocation. However, orphans and widows would likely have been part of an extended Israelite family and would have lived and worked on the farms of their kin. However, for the landless struggling farmers or those who had temporarily “sold” their land because of economic misfortune, nine further measures of the Mosaic Law in table 1, discussed below, were directed to improving their economic position. These “poor” were not defined, but invariably were identified with the orphan, widow, and resident alien. As Schneider (2002) notes, “concern for the poor and powerless (including the earth and animals) is indeed in the very soul of the law” (p. 77), toward “giving the poor special upward movement” (p. 78). Since the nine injunctions below aimed to increase material sustenance for the poor, they comport with the definition used here of enhancing economic egalitarianism—that is, they meet the basic material needs of all, and encourage more equal opportunities and outcomes than would exist otherwise. Certainly, the material condition of the poor would have been worse and distributional inequalities more extreme without the nine measures. More detailed examinations of economic the provisions of the Mosaic Law are Mason (1987, 1996), Wright (2004), Schaefer and Noell (2005), Beed and Beed (2006), and Sider (2007).

The first three items of table 1 sought to ensure that the basic food needs of the poor would be met. In item 1, food could be gathered from others’ farms at any time, to be eaten then and there (Deut. 23:24-25), while farmers had to leave the gleanings of their harvest for the poor and the alien (Lev. 19:9-10, 23:22; Deut. 24:19-21). Cairns (1992) explains that these “forgotten” sheaves and fruit were “deliberately intended for the poor” (p. 214); Nelson (2002) asserts that “the poor have a legal right to access” to this food (p. 293). Item 2 made a ten percent produce tax available to the poor every third year, as well as to its yearly Levite recipients (Deut. 14:28-29, 26:12-13). As Craigie (1976) puts it, “those without regular means of subsistence ... were thrown onto God” (p. 234) and would have their needs partly met by the tithe, while Johnston (2005) points out that “giving to the poor is just as sacred as giving to the priests” (p. 184). Finally, in item 3, every seventh year (the Sabbatical Year), the land was to remain fallow and its produce freely available to the poor as well as to the trustee farmers (Ex. 23:10-11; Lev. 25:1-7). Some exegetes (e.g., Currid, 2001, p. 118) suggest that the Sabbatical Year was rotated between land areas so that the poor would be able to gather food each year. The idea underlying these laws was “that all members of the covenant society have rights, in principle, to a share in the blessings of the land, which is ultimately Yahweh’s gift to the people.... This principle

overrides all other economic and property considerations” (McConville, 2002, p. 364). In total, measures 1-3 would ensure more economically egalitarian outcomes than without them, as that term is understood here.

Items 4-7 required loans from the well-off to the poor, including resident aliens (Ex. 22:25-27; Lev. 25:35-38; Deut. 15:1-11, 23:19-20). The purpose of the loans was to enable the disadvantaged to attain a state where they could exercise their economic capability to ensure that their basic material needs were met. These loans (produce and money) were interest free to native Israelites (item 6), and probably to resident aliens, part of the Israelite covenant community (Schaefer & Noell, 2005, p. 5), as distinct from foreign temporary residents in Israelite localities. Sarna (1991) points out that “biblical law is unique in the ancient Near East in imposing an absolute ban on lending and borrowing with interest” (p. 139). If interest were to be charged to a poor farmer, the probability would increase that he would be pushed into further poverty (Johnston, 2005, p. 170). Most exegetes (e.g., Johnston, 2005, p. 117; Nelson, 2002, p. 195; Harman, 2001, p. 165; Mann, 1995, p. 115; Thompson, 1974, p. 187) interpret item 7 to mean that the outstanding balance of a loan was to be cancelled every seven years, so that the loan laws worked in the direction of periodically cancelling all debt used for the above purpose. Despite this, the better-off could not escape their obligation to lend—“the call to provide loans was apodictic” (Schaefer & Noell, 2005, p. 4). It might sound inconsistent to say that loans were given to prevent debt, but the loans were more akin to grants. One aim of the loan (grant) provisions was to prevent the occurrence of debt, “the greatest internal threat to the social foundation of the equality of all the Israelites” (Hartley, 1992, p. 424). This aim is emphasized by Nelson (2002): the loan laws “seek to rob debt of its tyrannical power, to limit human misery, and to avoid a paralysis of economic life that would stunt the blessings of productivity” (p. 190). The loan requirements would have helped meet the material needs of the poor, generated more equal outcomes than would have prevailed otherwise, and enhanced equality of opportunity for the recipients to meet their material needs.

Members of the Israelite community (natives and resident aliens) who could not support themselves from the above assistance had the option of item 9. This included, for native Israelites, being taken on as permanent or temporary live-in laborers by their kin (Lev. 25:35-37)—temporarily if they recovered financially. This recovery might have included paying back a debt, or having it forgiven in the Sabbatical Year. For cases of greater economic hardship, the options also included selling themselves

as bond-servants (with family) to better-off farmers (Lev. 25:39-43), to be released at the Jubilee. Native Israelites could not be made slaves, but poor resident aliens (with family) and prisoners of war could, although their working and living conditions were to be comparable with employed native Israelites (Lev. 25:44-46). Even so, slaves “were not so numerous,” and “really formed part of the family,” according to de Vaux (1967, pp. 23, 85), while Sarna (1991) suggests that “there is no evidence” that slavery “was of major economic importance in the region” (p. 118). Compared with the option of no employment at all and of economic hardship, even these bond-servant/slave provisions encouraged more equal economic outcomes than would exist without them, for the basic material needs of the laborer/bond-servant/slave and his family would be met by the employer.

The specifications of item 9 are spelled out somewhat differently in Deuteronomy and Exodus. The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (NRSV) raises the concept of Hebrew “slaves” who had sold themselves to their employer (Deut. 15:12-18, similar but not identical to Ex. 21:1-11). The NRSV expresses their status in a footnote as bondspersons, while the New International Version calls them servants. Some exegetes echo this view that their status was more that of an indentured servant working off debt servitude (Motyer, 2005, p. 239; Meyers, 2005, p. 190). These persons had the option of terminating their slave/servant-like status in the Sabbatical Year whereupon the slave (whose work conditions were not to be harsh) would be sent away bearing gifts intended to make him economically more self-sufficient than he would otherwise be. As Brueggemann (2001) observes, “debt cancellation by itself would send the poor person back on the street without any resources” (p. 166). Alternatively, these bondservants could stay with their employer forever in relative economic security. Some exegetes (e.g., Noth, 1962, p. 177) raise the notion that “Hebrew” does not refer to an Israelite but to different nationality under-privileged strata within Israelite society. Nevertheless, the provisions pushed in the direction of greater egalitarianism in economic outcomes than would occur without them, for they were a preferable option to no sustenance or employment at all.

Struggling Israelite families could temporarily “sell” their land to the better-off at any time subject to price rules (Lev. 25:25-28), and were to be given work as hired help (Lev. 25:35-38). If those who sold land recovered financially, they (or their kin) had the right to re-purchase the land at a fixed price, also at any time (item 8). The price rules were based on the number of seasons left until the Jubilee, so that in effect they forestalled “speculative dealing in land” (Demarest, 1990, p. 266). Every fiftieth year

(the Jubilee), farms reverted to the original trustees free of charge (item 8) (Lev. 25:8-17). Simultaneously, the Sabbatical Year was proclaimed—land remained fallow (item 3), debts were canceled (item 7), and Israelite slaves were freed (item 9). For Israelite families who were the recipients of the fifty-year redistribution, the Jubilee was economically “egalitarian” as that term is used here. The Jubilee aimed to reinstate equal opportunity, aimed to enable each family to meet its material needs from its farm, and pushed in the direction of more equal outcomes than would exist without the Jubilee. In these senses, the Jubilee had economically egalitarian orientations. The Jubilee had other aims as well, such as preserving family unity and maintaining “the solidarity of the various clans in Israel by keeping alive the ideal of the equality of all Israelite citizens under the covenant” (Hartley, 1992, p. 443).

The Jubilee was especially valuable to those families which had not prospered after the initial land distributions, and who had temporarily “sold” their land to better-off families. Schaefer and Noell (2005) express it that the Jubilee “can return a family from landlessness to its original status as a landed family” (p. 6). For Wenham (1979), “the jubilee would have restored some semblance of equality between men, thereby recapturing something of the relationship that existed between men at their creation” (p. 317). Insofar as God’s intention via the Mosaic Law was that every Israelite family should exercise its own productive capability to meet its needs, reshuffling farmland back to its original trustees restored each family to that potential. As Schneider (2002) points out, the purpose of the Jubilee was “to protect the Israelite families structurally from poverty and to empower them for both lives of redemptive action and delight in the abundance of the land,” broadening throughout Scripture into “the messianic vision for all human beings” (p. 86).

Of course, the Jubilee was not totally egalitarian in direction since particular groups, such as resident aliens, had received no initial land and therefore no land at the Jubilee. Schneider (2002) claims that “the principle of redistribution” of the Jubilee “was certainly nothing like an egalitarian one” (p.83), because certain groups were excluded from the initial and fifty-year land re-allocations. Despite these omissions, the Jubilee did have egalitarian effects on those at whom it was directed, the majority of Israelite society. It cannot be claimed that “the poorest people in society were unaffected by it” because resident aliens received no benefit from the Jubilee (Schneider, 2002, p. 83). As noted above, the Jubilee occurred simultaneously with (or immediately following) the Sabbatical Year, and the economically egalitarian provisions of that year applied. Some of the poorest might well have included Israelites who would benefit from both

the Sabbatical Year and the Jubilee. Conversely, not all resident aliens were among the poorest. Some non-Israelite wage earners might have enjoyed a reasonable sufficiency without having to take advantage of the nine item safety net of table 1 above. To what extent non-Israelites “purchased” land from Israelites within the fifty-year constraint is unknown. This possibility existed (Lev. 25:47-55), but these non-Israelites would have been somewhat foolhardy for they knew their land would be taken away from them at the Jubilee. Evidently, the Jubilee’s egalitarian tendencies were to be extended in the new eschatological exodus by Israel. Ezek. 47:14 asserts that at this point the land is to be divided “equally” between the tribes, and resident aliens are to share in the allocation. While Joseph is to be given two portions, this is because, as Josh. 14:4 points out, “the people of Joseph were two tribes, Manasseh and Ephraim.”

The aim of the nine safety nets in the Mosaic Law, plus the initial land allocations, was to prevent poverty from occurring, especially through debt. Their purpose was to enable each able-bodied member of Israelite society, native and alien, to earn via work a sufficient living to provide for their basic needs. This sufficiency was to be liberal enough for them to participate fully in the economic, social, and religious life of the society. In this sense, the Law’s effects pushed in the direction of greater economic egalitarianism, as defined here, than would have existed without the measures. Inequalities in varying economic (and other) dimensions would exist within the society, but the Law purposed to ameliorate them, and push toward greater economic equality. De Vaux (1967) summarizes the safety nets as aiming “at preventing pauperism and restoring a certain equality between Israelites” (p. 73), while Mason (1987) expresses it that the Mosaic Law aimed “in the direction of economic equality” (p. 7), seeking to mitigate characteristics of economic inequality by emphasizing an “egalitarian bias.”

Similar variants of the economically egalitarian bias, orientation, nature, and outcomes of the Mosaic Law intentions in pre-monarchical Israel (as per table 1) have been proposed by others.¹ Qualifying these conclusions is Meyers (2002, pp. 35-45), who describes the social structure of pre-monarchical Israel as “heterarchical,” in which lateral egalitarian tendencies would exist between different groups, such as tribes. McNutt (1999) doubts that an egalitarian social structure was achieved in ancient Israel, even though “ideally, land would have been evenly distributed among families. It is unlikely, however, that there was a truly egalitarian socioeconomic structure in Iron Age 1, as Gottwald argued. Ethnographic studies indicate that even in societies with an egalitarian ideology, there

is some differentiation in status, power and wealth” (p. 74). Schaefer and Noell (2005) suggest the Law as aimed at ensuring “equal access” (p. 7) and limiting “the redistribution of wealth from the poor to the wealthy” (p. 6). They see the Law as providing “the propertyless with sustenance they would otherwise not have in an agrarian economy” (p. 5). Finally, Mason (1996, pp. 154, 158, 164) assesses the Law as involving “government-mediated income redistribution” from the better off to the poor. It sought to avoid the danger of concentration of economic power, instead seeking “deconcentrations in property ownership and in economic life generally.” All these judgments conform to the definition employed here of economically egalitarian tendencies contained within the Law.

Notwithstanding its non-egalitarian features (e.g., slavery), Bauckham (2002) describes the sought pre-monarchical structure of Israel as “an economically realistic form of egalitarianism, recognizing that, since power and privilege come from the accumulation of wealth, real equality must have an economic base” (p. 120). Whether pre-monarchical Israel actually achieved an economic egalitarian bias or not, most of the commentators above suggest this was the intention (God’s intention for most of them). Since land was the main form of productive physical capital in early Israel, some draw the implication that the Jubilee “would prevent the accumulation of ownership [of capital] in the hands of a wealthy few” (Wright, 1995, p. 210; see also Lowery, 2000, p. 68; Kelly, 2004, p. 7). A further implication is that were these egalitarian qualities to have been followed throughout history, the distribution of wealth would be more evenly distributed among the peoples of the world today, and that this should be the case (Griffiths, 1984, p. 57; Hay, 1989, p. 217; Wright, 1995, p. 210).

3 An Argument against Economic Egalitarianism: Land Allocations in Pre-monarchical Israel

Various steps of the initial land allocation process described in the previous section have been criticized as non-egalitarian. Beisner (1997) argued that “the law was not based on an initial equal distribution of land,” that “the initial distribution of land to the tribes of Israel (described in Josh. 13-21) was by no means equal” but was a “highly unequal original distribution” (pp. 51-52). Although the effects of the Jubilee would have been to restore land allocations to their original configurations, this was not an egalitarian one. Beisner’s evidence is that the land areas allocated to each tribe in Joshua were not proportional to tribal numbers. Some small tribes like Simeon ended up with much larger land areas than bigger tribes like Benjamin. Beisner’s estimates of tribal numbers are not from

Josh. 13-21, where none are stated, but from Numbers, which describes the different equi-proportional system of land allocation from Joshua for Israel on entering the Promised Land, discussed in section two. Biblical exegetes have long noted the inequality issue in Joshua. Butler (1983) observes that it has “provoked a number of scholarly theories concerning the origin and development of Joshua 13-19” (p. 142) that he surveys back to 1889. Joshua describes God as apportioning land by tribe, clan and families, and by lot, different from Num. 26:52-56 and 33:54, where the allocation is described as a mix of equity principles (areas proportional to tribal size) and lot, discussed in section two.

Beisner’s conclusions embody certain assumptions. One is that Joshua’s geographical descriptions of tribal area locations represented those allocated to the different tribes moving into the Promised Land—as described in the biblical text. The question is raised below whether the land areas and locations in Joshua depict these initial allocations. A related matter is whether Israel originated in the manner described in Joshua—namely, by military conquest—thus allowing such land allocations to be made. If Israel did not originate in the manner described in Joshua, less certainty can be attached to the manner of land allocation outlined in Josh. 13-19 (and in Numbers). A second assumption of Beisner’s methodology, only mentioned below, is his application of numerical magnitudes of tribal sizes in Numbers to geographic locational data in Joshua, again assuming both data are correct historically. The question arises whether this is methodologically legitimate.

Did the geographical lists of land locations in Joshua depict the allocations to the different tribes on Israel entering the Promised Land (perhaps 1550-1200 BC)—assuming this is how Israel did emerge? The question is expressed by Wright (1995) as “whether the lists are the end product of a lengthy period of tribal immigration and settlement ... or the deposit of an original act of allotment after early military victories” (p. 47). What is not at issue is that the lists did “correspond roughly to territorial reality” at “some point in the early history of Israel.” Biblical exegetes on Joshua suggest that a categorical answer cannot be given to Wright’s question. If this is the case, Beisner’s conclusions might be doubted, although whether more so than the opposing claims is moot. The Joshua texts and their relevance to Beisner’s claims are considered below.

Biblical exegetes of Joshua ascribe different dates than Beisner to the Joshua land allocation texts (Josh. 13-19). Three recent examples indicate a lack of consensus about the Joshua compilation. Creach (2003) claims that the earliest books 2-11 were written after 587 BC, while “the section

on the allotment of the land may be a late addition to the book” (p. 10). He examines various features of Joshua indicating “that it was written long after the period of Joshua.... The book shows evidence of a protracted development” (p. 12). An analogy might be drawn between Creach’s judgment about the conquest battles described in Joshua—that they were “mostly aggrandized by authors living centuries after the events” (p. 10)—and the description of the land allocations in Josh. 13-19. To Creach, “Joshua should be read primarily as theological literature, not as history in the modern sense” (p. 5).

A second Joshua exegete, Howard (1998), is less categorical than Creach about the dates of the Josh. 13-19 texts, but notes that “mainstream critical scholarship usually assigns the composition of Joshua to the time of Josiah or later” (p. 30 fn)—that is, they were not redacted at the time of Israel’s entry into the Promised Land. Howard suggests that “most scholars” believe that the lists “came from sometime during the monarchy, the exile, or after the exile. More to the point, most such scholars do not believe that they accurately reflect any such parceling out of territories during the days of Joshua, but rather that they were retrojections of later political boundaries—or idealized boundaries that never existed at any time in history—back into the time of Joshua” (pp. 294-295). Howard himself does not accept this position, although for reasons he does not explain. At most, he reports in a footnote (p. 295) two conflicting viewpoints. Howard describes Kallai (1986) as “the most comprehensive study of the lists to date. ... Kallai concludes that the lists reflect actual historical realities during the time of the United Monarchies.” On the other hand, Howard also cites “R. S. Hess’s recent study” [1994] “that the lists reflect even earlier realities, from pre-monarchical, Late Bronze Age traditions.” This position is recapitulated by Hess (1996): Joshua preserves “authentic and ancient sources ... in the late second millennium BC” (p. 31).

A third and final Joshua exegete is Nelson (1997), to whom “Joshua is a historical witness to what later generations believed had happened to their ancestors” (p. 4). For Nelson, “there remains no content for any supposed older tradition” (p. 209). While “the geographical lists and boundaries can be considered as credible historical sources, witnessing to actual administrative structures,” they are “from a period later than Israel’s first emergence in the land” (p. 3). Much of Josh. 13-19 “seems to have been concocted by scribal erudition on the basis of traditions and source lists of uncertain origin This geographic data also underwent amplification after it was inserted” (p. 8). Nelson looks in detail at each of the tribe’s allocations. He draws conclusions such as that by the time of Josh. 13’s

composition, Rueben's land claims "would have been more utopian than realistic" (p. 173). Similarly, Nelson speaks of Judah's land claims in Joshua 15: 1-63 as being "idealized," for "we know of no pre-monarchic structure to which such a system of boundaries could credibly be ascribed.... One must seriously question whether the survival of such ancient inventories of border points is more likely than the later construction as a learned scribal enterprise" (pp. 185-186).

The conclusion of Howard (1998), from Kallai (1986), represents the most commonly held opinion among biblical exegetes, that the lists in Joshua (and Numbers) represents theological expressions from the time of the monarchy or more recently. Other contemporary scholars holding comparable views include Soggin (1972, pp. 11-13), Gottwald (1979, pp. 155-163, 182-184), Boling and Wright (1982, pp. 41, 51), Hamlin (1983, p. xvi), Nelson (1997, pp. 4, 209), Birch, Brueggemann, Fretheim, and Petersen (1999, p. 201), Creach (2003, p. 10), with Butler (1983) as non-committal. If this popular view is correct, that the location lists reflected historical reality from approximately 1000-700 BC, a further question bears on Beisner's conclusions above. This is whether the land allocations to Israel on entering Canaan, described in Josh. 13-19, also reflected the historical reality three to seven hundred years before (depending on when Josh. 13-19 was finally redacted, and when and how Israel is regarded as conquering Canaan). A majority of contemporary biblical interpreters do not accept this possibility either. Exceptions to this judgment include Woudstra (1981, pp. 9-10), Wright (1995, pp. 47-48), Hess (1996, p. 31), Howard (1998, p. 295), Kaiser (1998, pp. 163-170), as epitomized by Provan, Long, and Longman (2003), that "the late datings of biblical texts, including Joshua and Judges, are anything but assured" (p. 146). A separate question is whether Israel did enter the Promised Land in the manner of Joshua, by conquest of Canaan. A majority of modern biblical interpreters do not accept that description either, including Wright (1995), Hess (1996), and Howard (1998), but excepting Kaiser (1998) and Provan et al. (2003). If either or both these constraints did apply, the description of land allocations in the manner of Josh. 13-19 would probably have to be modified. These constraints represent additional objections to Beisner's judgments concerning the unequal allocative effects of initial distributions to the different tribes of Israel.

Consider the second of these constraints. Suppose alternative theories of Israel's emergence as a nation state are more accurate historically than Joshua's conquest model, such as the settlement, revolt, and evolutionary models, all requiring evidence beyond application of exegetical methods to

the biblical text. In this case, the process of land allocation and/or settlement to or by the different tribes of Israel on their entering the Promised Land might differ from the Joshua specifications (as described, for example, by Provan et al., 2003, pp. 139-147; Howard, 1998, pp. 36-40). An example of these alternative viewpoints is put by Nelson (1997) (relying on extra-biblical sources), that in Palestine in the early Iron Age two parallel cultures were developing. The elitist city-state culture of the lowlands (Canaan) contrasted with that in the highlands (Israel), characterized by an “egalitarian, rural village culture, without the social stratification” of the lowland city-states, “a largely self-contained economy based on farming and herding.” This was the society described in Judges, and “that came to identify itself as Israel” (Nelson, 1997, pp. 36-40, 4). If these descriptions are historically accurate, the areas of land occupied by each of the tribes (as they eventually came to describe themselves) are unlikely to have been proportional to their sizes, having developed over hundreds of years. Even scholars basically sympathetic to the biblical position, such as Provan et al. (2003), suggest that “while none of the standard models [of Israel’s emergence] does justice to the full range of testimony, each may capture some aspect of what actually happened” (p. 191).

Nelson’s suggestion is that within tribal settlements an egalitarian culture prevailed. This could mean something like farm/herd sizes being more or less proportional to the sizes of the extended families constituting the basic productive units. Various Old Testament scholars view the pre-monarchical settlements of Israel in this egalitarian manner to differing degrees, noted above, as do biblical exegetes, such as Hamlin (1983, pp. 109-117), to whom “a new egalitarian society is set up in Canaan.” This matter is pertinent to the argument about egalitarian tendencies in ancient pre-monarchical Israel, is not canvassed by Beisner, and only noted briefly here. In this scenario, the egalitarian unit is the extended-family-based farm, not the tribe. It is a within tribe criterion, described in the Pentateuch only indirectly (as in the New English Bible, Num. 33:54). It can also be inferred from archaeological evidence and deduced backward in time from the rest of the Mosaic Law with its particular egalitarian biases. Slavery, resident aliens, and patriarchy would be excluded from this conclusion, even though each of these inegalitarian relations have to be qualified; for example, “gender hierarchy in work roles was virtually nonexistent” (McNutt, 1999, p. 96). A contrast is drawn, therefore, between the autocratic, hierarchical, exploitative (via rents and taxes), landlord- and tenant-based system of landholding prevailing in Canaan before Israel’s conquest, and the form of independent, egalitarian, rent-

free land holdings that developed in Israel during and after its victory/development. Hamlin (1983) is a typical expression of this view, also noting that the “Canaan pattern” is very common in many parts of the world today.” Independently of whether land allocations to Israel were based on tribal sizes, to Hamlin and others they were based on long-term trusteeships of the land embodying an egalitarian familial structure, in which no privileged class or landlord existed, aside from God, to whom the only land “rent” required was obedience.

All the above makes claims against the arguments of Beisner (1997), to whom “gross inequality” would have prevailed “between families of different tribes,” assuming his interpretations of tribe sizes and land areas in Joshua are correct historically. “A family of Simeon, for instance, would have received a piece of land more than eleven times the size of one received by Issachar” (and also assuming that Joshua describes the land allocative process by God on Israel entering the Promised Land). Only if the Joshua specifications are historically valid is Beisner correct that “nothing in Scripture indicates that it [land] was evenly divided within tribes.” On the other hand, more weight might be placed on Numbers, and the intra-tribal egalitarian-type thesis, while allowing for differences in “fertility and other important determinants of value” in farm sizes between extended family units (Beisner, 1997, p. 52).

Also pertinent to the argument of this section is whether the sizes of the tribal populations in Numbers were made close enough in time to permit them to be applied to the land areas in Joshua, as Beisner does, and whether the tribe size magnitudes were correct historically. Again, definite answers cannot be given. As far as the actual magnitudes of the sizes of the tribal populations listed in Numbers are concerned, most Old Testament scholars and biblical exegetes do not accept them as historically accurate (Kaiser, 1998, being an exception). A review of the different theories proposed concerning tribal sizes in Numbers is Ashley (1993, pp. 60-66), who concludes that “we lack the materials in the text to solve this problem.” Although these matters are not reviewed in detail here, uncertainties about both the date of Numbers and the tribe sizes listed in Numbers would seem to caution against applying tribal sizes to geographic area information in Joshua, as Beisner does.

The literature on the Joshua texts discussed above casts doubt on Beisner’s categorical claims, particularly his claims that the system of land allocation described in Josh. 13-19 was that decreed by God for Israel on its entry into the Promised Land, and that this was not equi-proportional. Ignoring the system of land allocation described in Numbers, Beisner

(1997) concludes that the distribution described in Joshua “was by divine order, so it cannot have been unjust” (p. 52).

The land allocation system of Num. 26:52-56 and 33:54, which differs from that described in Joshua, was examined in section two. Biblical interpreters differ on whether and how the land allocations system described in Numbers (equi-proportionality and lot) can be harmonized with Joshua. Usually, no mention is made in commentaries on Numbers on the its differences with Josh. 18:6 (lot only). Num. 26:54 explicitly says that “every tribe shall be given its inheritance according to its numbers,” with Num. 26:56 and 33:54 implying that the lot will bring this about. If Josh. 13-19 describes the results of the allocation procedures, this did not eventuate. But the discussion above cast doubt on whether Josh. 13-19 did report results of the initial land allocations.

Whether a system of land holdings with an egalitarian basis developed in pre-monarchical Israel remains a matter of judgment. The weight of evidence is in its favor, if the majority view of biblical exegetes, commentators, and of the archaeological evidence is the guide. This possibility is strengthened when the land allocation system is regarded as part and parcel of other supports in the Mosaic Law (table 1) trending in an economically egalitarian direction. The conclusion that some form of equi-proportional land distribution transpired in Israel when it entered the Promised Land, or developed within it, seems a reasonable hypothesis. Even if Israel did not enter Canaan in the manner described in Joshua or Numbers, an equi-proportional distribution by tribe or family might still have occurred, as Numbers implies. Attention would then be directed to extra-biblical archaeological evidence suggesting the possibility that land holdings were more or less proportional in size (if not in fertility) to the extended family units’ farms within tribes constituting the economic basis of Israelite society.

The effects of the Jubilee would depend on which of the alternatives described the historical situation. Even if Beisner is correct that the initial land allocations were unequal in area between tribes, and therefore between individual farmers between tribes, the Jubilee would still have acted to deconcentrate land holdings between farmers within tribes as they became more concentrated between Jubilees. In this way, the Jubilee would still have produced more egalitarian outcomes. This contradicts Beisner (1997) who states that the Jubilee, “if obeyed, would not have reduced inequalities of wealth in Israel” (p. 52). As Wenham (1979) puts it, “the jubilee was intended to prevent the accumulation of the wealth of the nation in the hands of a very few” (p. 323). With the viewpoint that a type

of economically egalitarian society prevailed in pre-monarchical Israel, the Jubilee might well have preserved egalitarian tendencies between extended families in tribes. Wright (1990) and Lowery (2000) argue that it seems more likely that the Jubilee was designed to apply to extended families within tribes than between them (Wright, 1990, pp.119-128; Wright, 1995, pp. 197-212; Wright, 2004, pp. 198-210; Lowery, 2000, pp. 65-72, 76-77). Undoubtedly, the Jubilee could not have changed the original distributional pattern of land. If the initial or pre-existing distribution of land was equi-proportional among tribes or extended families, the Jubilee would have returned the distribution of the major form of wealth, land, to its pre-existing egalitarian pattern. The Jubilee would also change the distribution of other forms of wealth in ancient Israel, such as money, livestock and buildings. Its impact on the distribution of livestock and (farm) buildings would have been proportional to its impact on land holdings in so far as livestock and farm building holdings would have been proportional to land holdings.

The Jubilee did not further redistribute wealth if a farmer was forced to temporarily “sell” his land between Jubilees. As Beisner (1997) notes, “there was no net gain or loss from the transaction to either buyer or seller simply in the exchange of land or money” (p. 52). Possibilities seem remote in the agrarian self-sufficient economy of ancient Israel for farmers to use money proceeds from the temporary sale of land for economic purposes yielding returns higher than the prevailing norm. Probably, most farmers who sold land would have sought employment as farm laborers in the context of the Jubilee, and within the broader raft of Mosaic Law measures designed to maintain the indigent in adequate economic circumstances, all possessing an economic egalitarian bias (as noted in section two). Also forestalling further redistributive tendencies was, as Beisner (1997) notes, that the farmer to whom the land was temporarily sold paid a price equal to “the combined annual value of the prospective harvests” (p. 52). Only if he achieved harvests above the estimated customary level would he have achieved a net gain at the expense of the temporary seller. The redistributive effects of temporary land sales between the Jubilee are likely to have been minor. On the other hand, the long-term redistributive effects were major in the sense that the Jubilee’s aim was to restore the original distribution of land.

4 Conclusion

Three matters have been examined here. The first was to establish an acceptable meaning of “economic egalitarianism,” given that this term is still used diversely in the economics literature. The term has been

employed here in the sense of one or more of three aims being pursued—generating a greater degree of outcome equality, promoting equal opportunity, and ensuring that basic needs are met. The second matter was whether an economic egalitarian basis underlay the initial distribution of land in ancient Israel reported in the books of Joshua and Numbers. The third matter was the subsequent egalitarian effects on economic distribution in pre-monarchical Israel of the Mosaic Law, including the Jubilee. Application of the Mosaic Law and the Jubilee (if they had been practiced) would have fostered an economic egalitarian direction of care for the Israelite community and for the long-term trusteeship of the land (its only owner being God). Differences in land fertility and/or human action might subsequently produce less equal economic outcomes after the initial (egalitarian) land allocations between the tribes or extended families making up the tribes (although God’s obedience requirements discounted that possibility). Further egalitarian-directed measures of the Mosaic Law, examined in section two, including the Jubilee, sought to modify that situation. No claim is made for a strict arithmetical economic equality in the initial allocations, or subsequently. Rather, the conclusion is that an economic egalitarian direction of thought (as defined in section one) existed both in the original land allocations and in subsequent Mosaic Law regulations, including the Jubilee. This also seems to be the eschatological promise expressed by Ezekiel.

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Endnotes

- 1 These authors include de Vaux (1967, pp. 88, 173), Gottwald (1979, pp. 389, 692), Mott (1982, pp. 68-69), Mason (1987, p. 7), Niedercorn (1985, p. 191), Hay (1989, p. 34), Kraybill (1990, pp. 91-99), Birch (1991, pp. 179-182), Yoder (1994, pp. 69-70), Albertz (1994, pp. 72-76), Wright (1995, p. 155), Wright (2004, p. 207), Sider (1997, pp. 67-72), Mott and Sider (1999, pp. 35-40), Pleins (2001, p. 70), Forrester (2001, p. 88), and Bauckham (2002, pp. 118-121).