

# “Economy matters”



## A series of Ujamaa Centre Contextual Bible Studies

### Foreword

Local and international realities have forced us to focus on matters of the economy. Even ordinary South Africans have had to try and make sense of ‘the global recession’, for we too have been impacted by global economic systems.

But important as matters of the economy are to all of us, the church does not seem to have a vocabulary with which to engage the economic dimension of life. This set of Bible studies offers resources with which we can build together a vocabulary to talk, in church, about economy matters.

Even when we as Christians do use the Bible to talk about the economy, we tend to do so by focussing on biblical themes, isolating these themes from the ‘economic systems’ that undergird the biblical texts. Economic matters are a key component of the Bible, particularly if we pay careful attention to the detail of biblical texts.

For example, consider these two texts from the book of Proverbs. In Proverbs 22:2 we read: “The *rich* and the *poor* have this in common: the Lord is the maker of them all”. However, in Proverbs 29:13 we read: “The *poor* and the *oppressor* have this in common: the Lord gives light to the eyes of both”. These two sayings are almost identical, but there is a significant difference. While the second lines of both proverbs affirm the presence of God as creator and sustainer of all, the first lines show a significant shift. In the first saying it is possible to speak of the “the rich and the poor” in non-relational terms; ‘the rich’ and ‘the poor’ are descriptive terms designating two different yet structurally unrelated social sectors. In the

second saying the term “the rich” is replaced by the pejorative “the oppressor”. The rich and poor are here linked relationally; there is now a structural, systemic, relationship between these two social sectors. We have moved from an economic system in which wealth is the product of diligent work and therefore a blessing from God, to an economic system in which wealth is the product of the oppression of the poor. ‘The rich’ are wealthy because ‘the poor’ are poor.

This kind of relational economic link lies beneath the surface of life, and so is not always easy to discern. If we reflect back on apartheid South Africa, the relational dimension of life is easier to see. For example, growing up as a white South Africa under apartheid, about twenty times more money was spent on my education than on that of my black brother or sister. This, we know, was a deliberate structural strategy to educate whites for leadership and blacks for subservience, and was given theological support by the white Afrikaner churches. I was well educated *because* my black brother or sister was poorly educated. The relationship between my education and theirs was relational.

With the advent of global economics much of our economic life is systemic and relational. As this series of Contextual Bible Studies demonstrate, the Bible has plenty to say about systemic economic relationships! These Bible studies are designed to enable us to engage with the Bible deeply, whether we work alone or, preferably, together in groups. They are designed to enable participation by everyone; and they are designed to give the biblical texts a ‘voice’.

To facilitate this process of hearing each other’s voices and the voice of the text, those who do these Bible studies in groups should nominate someone in the group to ‘facilitate’ each Bible study. We have made the Bible studies as accessible as possible, using a series of questions in each case as the basic format of the Bible study. There are no right answers to the questions! Through the questions you are invited to engage with the biblical text and your context. Each question is designed to take you deeper into the biblical text or deeper into the engagement between the biblical text and your context. In each Bible study we have also offered some input so as to enable the voice of the biblical text to be heard distinctly. This form of Bible study draws you into dialogue with particular biblical texts and your context. So we encourage you to follow the format of each Bible study, allowing sufficient time for engaging with the questions and the input. So, if you use these Bible studies in a group setting, it will be useful to appoint someone as a facilitator, whose task it will be to enable everyone to participate and complete the Bible study within a given time period.

It is important that the facilitator for each Bible study devote some time in advance of the Bible study to read through the Bible study by way of preparation. This will enable the facilitator to have a sense of the ‘shape’ of each particular study and to draw other group members into the tasks of reading and praying. For the facilitator who wants to know more about Contextual Bible Study, the Ujamaa Centre Manual: Doing Contextual Bible Study, is available free of charge on the Ujamaa Centre website: <http://ujamaa.ukzn.ac.za>

## **Bible Study 1**

### **1 Samuel 8:1-22**

*The facilitator asks someone to open with a brief prayer.*

*The facilitator asks someone in the group to read 1 Samuel 8:1-22. Or, the reading of the text can be done corporately, with different members of the group taking turns to read sections.*

Question 1: What is the text about? Share initially in twos your initial impression of this text, and then share with the group as a whole.

*When the group has had sufficient time to respond, the facilitator moves on to the next questions.*

Question 2: What are ‘internal’ (within the community of Israel) factors and ‘external’ (outside the community of Israel) factors that lead the elders of Israel to request to have a king?

Question 3: What do the elders of Israel see as the benefits of a king?

*When the group has had sufficient time to discuss these questions, the facilitator reads or invites someone in the group to read the following note:*

Ancient Israel was founded by Yahweh, the God who heard the cry of slaves (Exodus 3:7), and so the society God established under the leadership of Moses and the early judges was not like the city-states of Egypt and Canaan. The city-states of the Ancient Near East were large and powerful cities, ruled by a king with a standing professional army, which controlled the surrounding villages and countryside. In order to sustain itself, the city-state implemented a tributary economic system in which the families in local villages were required to pay ‘tribute’. This tribute paid for the royal court and the army; in return the city-state governed and protected the people in the villages.

Ancient Israel was meant to be different. And so ancient Israel was ruled by local, village or clan/tribe based elders and judges. There was no centralised system. When there was a need for protection from raids by neighbouring peoples, most notably the Philistines (who were a very powerful regional city-state), various Israelite clans/tribes would collaborate to protect themselves (see the book of Judges).

But the elders of Israel became disillusioned with this clan/tribe based village system. Internally, they were disappointed by the corruption of Samuel’s sons (1 Samuel 8:3, 5), and externally, they were disillusioned by having to be farmers one day and military fighters the next. They desired to be “like other nations” (5, 20), wanting a king “to govern” them and “to go out before us and fight our battles” (20).

*Having listened to the note, the facilitator moves the group on to the next question.*

Question 4: How does Samuel characterise the centralised system the elders want?

*When the group has had sufficient time to discuss this question, the facilitator moves on to the next question.*

Question 5: What are the benefits and what are ‘the costs’ of *our* national and international centralised economic systems?

*When the group has had sufficient time to discuss this question, reads or invites someone in the group to read the following note:*

Although Samuel and God are clearly opposed to the tributary economic system, that “takes” and “takes” (11, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17), they do not stand in the way of the desire for a centralised economic system under the rule of a king. This ambiguity about a centralised economic system continues on through the pages of the Bible, right into the time of Jesus, as we will see in our Bible studies together.

*The facilitator then invites someone to bring the Bible study to a close in prayer.*

*The facilitator encourages each group member to identify at least one insight from the Bible study, and to record it in their Bible study booklet.*

## **Bible Study 2**

### **1 Kings 12**

*The facilitator asks someone to open with a brief prayer.*

*The facilitator asks someone in the group to read 1 Kings 12:1-20. Or, the reading of the text can be done corporately, with different members of the group taking turns to read sections.*

*Question 1:* What is the text about? Share initially in twos your initial impression of this text, and then share with the group as a whole.

*When the group has had sufficient time to respond, the facilitator moves on to the next question.*

*Question 2:* Who are the characters in this story and what do we know about each of them?

*When the group has had sufficient time to respond, the facilitator moves on to the next two questions.*

*Question 3:* Why do you think “the older men” and “the young men” give different advice?

*Question 4:* Why do you think king Rehoboam disregards the advice of the older men and listens to the advice of the younger men (verses 13-14)?

*When the group has had sufficient time to respond to both questions, the facilitator reads or invites someone in the group to read the following note:*

This story is a ‘fulfilment’ of Samuel’s warning in 1 Samuel 8:17. The centralised tributary system has brought massive hardship to the local clans/tribes, particularly those in the north. Solomon has established Jerusalem as a city-state, and has set in place an administration for the gathering of tribute and of forced labour (see verse 18). The economic system included three forms of tribute: taxes paid to the city-state; tithes paid to the city-state temple; and forced labour. These placed a heavy burden on the vast majority of Israelites, over 90% of whom were subsistence farmers. But the heaviest burden fell on the clans/tribes in the north, for Solomon ‘protected’ his own clan, the tribe of Judah, to some extent from the tributary economic system. When the northern clans/tribes plead for a more lenient economic system, Rehoboam, taking the advice of his contemporaries, the young men, refuses to heed their cry. Unlike God (Exodus 3:7), Rehoboam refuses to hear the cry of those who have become enslaved. The result is rebellion, with the northern tribes refusing to submit to economic exploitation. They choose instead to establish their own kingdom, known from now on in the books of Kings as ‘the kingdom of Israel’. Economic exploitation has led to the division of the united kingdom; from now on there will be two kingdoms, one in the north (‘Israel’) and one in the south (‘Judah’).

*Having listened to the note, the facilitator moves the group on to the next question.*

*Question 5: How can we recognise unjust economic systems and make sure that we do not support unjust economic systems, even if (like Rehoboam and the young men) they benefit us?*

*When the group has had sufficient time to respond, the facilitator invites someone to bring the Bible study to a close in prayer.*

*The facilitator encourages each group member to identify at least one insight from the Bible study, and to record it in their Bible study booklet.*

**Bible Study 3**  
**Amos 2:4-8**

*The facilitator asks someone to open with a brief prayer.*

*The facilitator asks someone in the group to read Amos 2:4-8. Or, the reading of the text can be done corporately, with different members of the group taking turns to read sections.*

*Question 1: What is the text about? Share initially in twos your initial impression of this text, and then share with the group as a whole.*

*When the group has had sufficient time to respond, the facilitator moves on to the next question.*

*Question 2: What ‘systems’ does the prophet Amos address when he speaks, first, to the kingdom of Judah (verses 4-5), and then to the kingdom of Israel (verses 6-8)?*

*When the group has had sufficient time to respond, the facilitator moves on to the next question.*

*Question 3: Which is more important to the prophet, sexual sin or economic sin (see verses 6-8)?*

*When the group has had sufficient time to respond, the facilitator moves on to the next question.*

*Question 4: Why is it that we Christians tend to focus on sexual sin, but have difficulty in identifying and addressing economic sin?*

*When the group has had sufficient time to respond, the facilitator moves on to the next question.*

*Question 5: What are the most important sinful economic systems in our contexts?*

*When the group has had sufficient time to respond, the facilitator introduces the following task:*

*In groups of two, write a prayer of repentance, naming and asking forgiveness for our role in economic sin.*

*When the group has had sufficient time to respond, the Bible study is brought to a close with each group praying their prayer.*

*The facilitator encourages each group member to identify at least one insight from the Bible study, and to record it in their Bible study booklet.*

**Bible Study 4**  
**Mark 12:41-44**

*The facilitator asks someone to open with a brief prayer.*

*The facilitator asks someone in the group to read Mark 12:41-44. Or, the reading of the text can be done corporately, with different members of the group taking turns to read sections.*

*Question 1:* What is the text about? Share initially in twos your initial impression of this text, and then share with the group as a whole.

*When the group has had sufficient time to respond, the facilitator moves on to the next question.*

*Question 2:* What are the connections between this section of text and the text that comes immediately before it (Mark 12:38-40)? Note each of the elements they have in common.

*When the group has had sufficient time to respond, the facilitator moves on to the next question.*

*Question 3:* What are the connections between these sections of text (Mark 12:38-41) and the text that comes immediately after them (Mark 13:1-2)? Note each of the elements they have in common.

*When the group has had sufficient time to respond, the facilitator reads or invites someone in the group to read the following note:*

Jesus comes into the temple at 11:27 and leaves at 13:2. While in the temple Jesus is confronted by sectors of the temple leadership, including the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders (12:27-12:12), some Pharisees and some Herodians (12:13-17), some Sadducees (12:27), and one of the scribes (12:28-34). Jesus debates with them, challenging their interpretation of the Jewish theological tradition. He then turns away from the temple leadership and addresses the crowd (“who were listening to him with delight”, 12:37) and his disciples. In his teaching he challenges what the scribes ‘say’ (12:35-37), what the scribes ‘do’ (12:38-40), and then he moves to the temple treasury and invites the crowd and his disciples to consider the poor widow, inviting them to understand why he has been so critical of the temple leadership and tradition. He then leaves the temple, promising its destruction.

*When this note has been read, the facilitator moves to the next, related, question.*

*Question 4:* From the texts (Mark 12:38-13:2) we have read in detail, what does Jesus want the crowd and, particularly, his disciples to understand about the temple and its leadership?

*When the group has had sufficient time to respond, the facilitator reads or invites someone in the group to read the following note:*

In Mark's Gospel Jesus enters the temple in Jerusalem on three occasions, in 11:11, 11:15, and then in 11:27. When he enters the temple in 11:15 he disrupts and condemns the economic activity taking place in the temple. The Jerusalem temple, like most temples in the ancient Near East, was a central part of the tributary economy. The temple was used to 'extract' tribute and tithes from the villages. Every devote Jew was meant to visit the temple during key festivals, like Passover, and when they did, they were expected to pay tithes and make offerings. However, this system often became exploitative. Instead of using the income of the temple to support the needy (like the poor widow), the temple priests were often tempted to use the temple income to become rich. This seems to have been the case in the Jerusalem temple, for in Mark 11:17 Jesus claims that the temple has become "a den of robbers".

*When this note has been read, the facilitator moves to the next, related, question.*

*Question 5: How can we ensure that the resources of the church are used to serve all of God's people?*

*When the group has had sufficient time to respond, the facilitator invites someone to bring the Bible study to a close in prayer.*

*The facilitator encourages each group member to identify at least one insight from the Bible study, and to record it in their Bible study booklet.*

## **Bible Study 5**

### **Matthew 6:9-13**

*The facilitator asks someone to open with a brief prayer.*

*The facilitator asks someone in the group to read the following version of the Lord's Prayer, taken from Matthew 6:9-13.*

Matthew 6:9-13 <sup>9</sup> "Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. <sup>10</sup> Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. <sup>11</sup> Give us this day our daily bread. <sup>12</sup> And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. <sup>13</sup> And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one. [New Revised Standard version]

*Question 1:* Read Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer from as many different translations as you have in the group. How is Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer different from the version of the Lord's Prayer we pray in the Anglican Prayer Book?

*When the group has had sufficient time to respond, the facilitator moves on to the next question.*

*Question 2:* Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer, which is the oldest version of the Lord's Prayer we have, has a strong emphasis on economic matters. What does this version of the Lord's Prayer have to say about economic matters?

*When the group has had sufficient time to respond, the facilitator reads or invites someone in the group to read the following note:*

Most of the disciples and followers of Jesus were people who had lost their family lands because of debt. In struggling to survive as subsistence farmers they had had to borrow money from the moneylenders in the city, and so had fallen into debt. When they could not pay their debts the moneylenders would often foreclose on their property, including their land. So many families in the time of Jesus had lost their land through debt and had had to move into the city and become day-labourers, earning their living by working for a minimum daily wage (see the parable in Matthew 20:1-16). This is why Jesus recognises that they would need "daily bread". Jesus is showing them that God understands their economic situation. Without land they need daily bread; but it would be better if they could be released from their debt so that they could hold onto their land and produce food/bread for themselves. But Jesus makes it clear that we cannot expect those we owe money to to release us from debt if we are not also prepared to release those who owe money to us! So, perhaps what Jesus means by "your kingdom come, your will be done, *on earth* ..." includes a vision of a more just economic system.

*When this note has been read, the facilitator moves to the next, related, question.*

*Question 3:* What are the economic systems in our context that prevent ordinary people from providing for their own daily bread?

*When the group has had sufficient time to respond, the facilitator moves on to the next question.*

*Question 4: What can we do in our contexts to respond to the economic dimensions of Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer?*

*When the group has had sufficient time to respond, the facilitator invites everyone to bring the Bible study to a close by saying Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer together.*

*The facilitator encourages each group member to identify at least one insight from the Bible study, and to record it in their Bible study booklet.*

**Bible Study 6**  
**1 Corinthians 16:1-4**

*The facilitator asks someone to open with a brief prayer.*

*The facilitator asks someone in the group to read 1 Corinthians 16:1-4.*

*Question 1:* What is the text about? Share initially in twos your initial impression of this text, and then share with the group as a whole.

*When the group has had sufficient time to respond, the facilitator reads or invites someone in the group to read the following short note:*

At the end of many of Paul's letters he makes reference to giving, finance, and collecting contributions: 2 Corinthians 8:1-7, Romans 15:25-29, and Galatians 2:9-10. Read these texts of scripture together and then discuss the following question.

*Question 2:* What is Paul's 'theology' of giving? What do each of these texts tell us about how Paul understands Christian giving?

*When the group has had sufficient time to respond, the facilitator reads or invites someone in the group to read the following short note, and then the group moves on to discuss the related question:*

We live in a nation where we are required to pay taxes so that our government can provide the kind of infrastructure all South Africans need to live good lives, including basic housing, access to water and electricity, an adequate transport system, education, health care, etc. In addition to paying taxes, Christians are expected to give financially.

*Question 3:* How do we as Christians understand the relationship between the role of the state and the role of the church in economic matters?

*When the group has had sufficient time to respond, the facilitator moves on to the next question.*

*Question 4:* How do we as Christians understand our giving within the context of the church?

*When the group has had sufficient time to respond, the facilitator moves on to the next question.*

*Question 5:* Having reflected on a range of biblical texts, including texts from the Old Testament, from the Gospels, and from Paul, what have we learned about 'economic matters' during this ?

*When the group has had sufficient time to respond, the facilitator invites group members to enter a time of open prayer to bring the Bible study to a close.*

*The facilitator encourages each group member to identify at least one insight from the Bible study, and to record it in their Bible study booklet.*