

Commerce in the New Testament Period

New Testament authors maintain that the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil (1 Tim. 6:10) and that no one can serve both God and wealth (Matt. 6:24). With such attitudes as these, not to mention the many attacks on those who are wealthy (e.g., Mark 10:25; Luke 6:24–28; 12:13–21; 16:19–31; 1 Tim. 1:10; 3:3; 6:9–10, 17–19), it might be surprising to find that the New Testament also provides detailed information about commerce and economic life. Here, we present information organized according to three geographical divisions of the Greco-Roman world: the city, the countryside, and the wilderness.

Commerce in the City

The city (in Greek, *polis*) was the scene of many economic institutions and roles. In the marketplace, retailers (2 Cor. 2:17) displayed wares of all sorts: purple cloth (Acts 16:14), swords (Luke 22:36), oil for lamps (Matt. 25:9), linen and spices for burial (Mark 15:46; 16:1), pearls of great price (Matt. 13:45), and even sparrows at five for two pennies (Luke 12:6). The marketplace was also where people gathered early in the morning to be hired for occasional or seasonal labor (Matt. 20:3; cf. Acts 17:5); indeed, such laborers were called *agoraioi* or “people of the marketplace.” In addition, the marketplace was the scene for the sale of slaves (Matt. 18:25; cf.

1 Tim. 1:10). On occasion, one could see in the marketplace a slave girl with a “spirit of divination” bringing in money for her owners (Acts 16:16), young flute players ready to play for a wedding or funeral (Matt. 11:16–17), or a man carrying water (Mark 14:13). Also in the marketplace and elsewhere in the city were the workshops where artisans crafted innumerable products. Paul, for example, was a leatherworker, apparently specializing in tents (Acts 18:3; cf. 1 Thess. 2:9; 1 Cor. 4:12; 2 Cor. 11:27), and scattered references identify other artisans as fullers (Mark 9:3), tanners (Acts 9:43), silversmiths (Acts 19:24), potters (Rom. 9:21), and metalworkers (2 Tim. 4:14).

Port cities were involved in shipping (Acts 21:2–3). Especially important was the Roman grain trade, which receives incidental notice in the course of Paul’s journey to Rome for trial (Acts 27:2, 6, 38; 28:11). Grain, of course, was not the only import to Rome. Captains and sailors (Rev. 18:11) brought in merchandise from places as far away as Africa, China, and India, to judge from the long list in Revelation 18:12–13: gold and silver, jewels and pearls, purple cloth, silks and fine linen, scented woods, ivory, cinnamon, incense, perfumes, wine, oil, horses, and slaves. Construction was a ubiquitous urban economic activity. At the time of Jesus, for example, renovations and enlargements of the temple in Jerusalem had been going on for forty-six years (John 2:20), and references to building are quite common (Matt. 7:24; Mark 12:10; Luke 14:28; 1 Cor. 3:10; Eph. 2:20; Heb. 3:3). Equally ubiquitous, though less

reputable, were the economic activities of various urban marginals: thieves (Matt. 24:43; Luke 12:33; 1 Thess. 5:2), prostitutes (Luke 15:30), and beggars (Mark 10:46; Luke 16:3, 20–21; 1 John 3:17).

Economic activity also characterized the temple complex and the culture it maintained. Festivals drew large numbers of pilgrims to Jerusalem, making the temple the focal point of economic life there. The temple complex itself was a site for buying and selling sacrificial animals (Mark 11:15; John 2:14; cf. Luke 2:24) and for the reception of offerings, large and small (Mark 12:41–43; Acts 21:24). When such other economic activities as collecting the temple tax (Matt. 17:24) and money changing (Mark 11:15) are included, Jesus's use of an economic metaphor when denouncing the Jerusalem temple as a "marketplace" (John 2:16) becomes understandable.

The principal locus of the ancient economy, however, was the urban household, especially the "great households" (2 Tim. 2:20). These households were large, complex, and economically central. They included not only the householder and his wife and children, but also numerous slaves—a social pattern familiar from the household codes of Ephesian 5:21–6:9 and Colossians 3:18–4:1. But these households might also contain other persons for short or even extended periods of time: rich friends and neighbors invited in for a banquet (Mark 6:21–28; Luke 14:12; 1 Cor. 11:17–34); more formal groups, or associations, provided with room and resources for religious and social meetings (Rom. 16:1–2, 23; Philem. 22; 3 John

5–8); and still others, such as teachers and workers, admitted into the household for indefinite periods (1 Cor. 9:4–5; 3 John 5–8; cf. Acts 18:3).

The large numbers of people who belonged to a great household filled a variety of economic roles. Loyal and dependable slaves had positions of responsibility as stewards (Gal. 4:2), overseeing the householder's accounts (Luke 16:1), paying the householder's occasional hired help (Matt. 20:6), or being put in charge of the other slaves (Luke 12:42–45). Other tasks assigned to slaves included being in charge of a banquet (John 2:8), preparing food and waiting on tables (Luke 17:8), tutoring the householder's children (1 Cor. 4:15), delivering messages (Luke 14:17), answering the door (Mark 13:34; Acts 12:13), or working as artisans, a role not attested in the New Testament but implicit, for example, in Paul's perception of his tent-making as slavish (1 Cor. 9:1, 19).

A wealthy householder might not need to work (Matt. 13:27–30, 52; 20:1; 21:33; 14:21), though there are scattered references to such administrative functions as inspecting a new parcel of land (Luke 14:18), deciding what to do in the wake of sabotaged fields (Matt. 13:27), dealing personally with rebellious tenants (Mark 12:9), dismissing a steward suspected of mismanagement (Luke 16:2), and deciding whether to punish a returning slave who has caused financial loss (Philem. 10–18). As masters, householders could be harsh (Matt. 18:32–34; 1 Pet. 2:18), inflicting both verbal attacks

(Luke 19:22) and physical beatings (1 Pet. 2:19–20) on their slaves.

The New Testament counsels against masters making threats toward slaves and advocates fair treatment (Col. 4:1; Eph. 6:9), but slaves are likewise admonished to obey their masters, work hard, and not steal (Col. 3:22; Eph. 6:5–7; Titus 2:9–10).

A householder's wife also had economic responsibilities. Her roles in the household are succinctly listed in 1 Timothy 5:14: to marry, bear children, and manage the household (cf. Titus 2:4–5). This third function, managing the household, may have assumed responsibility for the family's internal finances (i.e., the household budget).

Despite their roles in the household economy, the householder and his wife should be viewed as users or consumers of wealth. They typically used their considerable wealth for public display, for impressing others, and for personal enjoyment. Wealth was displayed in jewelry and fine clothing (Luke 7:25; 16:19; James 2:2) as well as at banquets with gold and silver serving dishes (2 Tim. 2:20), extravagant menus (Luke 16:19), and costly entertainment. The use of wealth for personal enjoyment is also easily documented: the hedonistic motto of one household was “eat, drink, be merry” (Luke 12:19); another householder is depicted as feasting in great magnificence every day (Luke 16:19); and the rich are generally characterized as full and sated or otherwise satisfying their many desires (Luke 6:25; 1 Thess. 5:6–8; 1 Tim. 6:9–10; James 5:5).

While moneymaking activities in the city—loans (Matt. 18:23; 25:20–

23), savings (Luke 19:23), the sale of slaves (1 Tim. 1:10)—partially supported the aristocratic household and lifestyle, the principal source of the householder’s wealth was land, and this wealth came largely from the agricultural produce of extensive and ever-expanding (Mark 12:1; Luke 14:18) properties beyond the city walls in the countryside.

Commerce in the Countryside

The word “countryside” (in Greek, *chōra*) is a technical term with a decidedly economic meaning. It refers to all agriculturally productive land that surrounded the city. Used quite frequently in the New Testament in this economic sense (Luke 12:16; John 11:55; James 5:4), it refers specifically to fields, vineyards, pastures, orchards, and even woods with their supply of nuts, berries, wood, and game. It is here in the *chōra* that the householders owned land that was worked by tenants (Mark 12:1, 9) or slaves (Luke 17:7), who became rural members of their landlord’s already sizable households. On occasion, temporary help in the form of hired laborers (from the city or countryside) was required (Luke 15:15, 17), especially during the harvest of grain (Matt. 9:37; 13:30) or the vintage (Matt. 20:7). After the harvest, a slave manager would pay the temporary laborers (Matt. 20:8) and then take his master’s portion of the crop (Matt. 21:34), including any surplus (Luke 12:16–18). These tenants and slaves, along with independent farmers (Mark 4:3; Matt. 21:28), lived in villages scattered throughout the countryside. Villages also had

carpenters (Mark 6:3), shopkeepers (Luke 9:12), innkeepers (Luke 10:35; cf. 9:12; 24:28–29), and economic marginals such as beggars (Mark 10:46).

The economic life of the countryside was varied and hence required a variety of agricultural roles, or at least a variety of agricultural tasks. Farming and herding were the basic economic roles. Farmers, of course, grew grain (Matt. 13:24–25; Mark 4:26–29), but they could also take care of a vineyard (Matt. 21:28; Mark 12:1; 1 Cor. 9:7), fig trees (Luke 13:7; James 3:12), olive trees (Rom. 11:17–18), not to mention a garden for planting a mustard tree (Matt. 13:32; Luke 13:19) or vegetables (cf. Rom. 14:2). Likewise, herders obviously tended their livestock, whether cattle (Luke 15:23), sheep (Matt. 18:12; Luke 2:8; 1 Cor. 9:7), goats (Matt. 25:33; Luke 15:29), or pigs (Mark 5:11). In the region of the Sea of Galilee, the fishing industry was especially prominent (Mark 1:16–20; Luke 5:1–11; John 21:1–3). In addition, on occasion there were other jobs to do: building granaries (Luke 12:18), putting up fencing, making wine presses, building watchtowers (Matt. 21:33), and constructing synagogues (Luke 7:5).

The agricultural tasks can be defined further in order to give a sense of the actual work done in the countryside. Farmers, for example, had much to do: plowing the field (Luke 9:62; 17:7; 1 Cor. 9:10), winnowing (Luke 3:17), burning the chaff (Matt. 3:12), and storing the grain in barns (Matt. 6:26; Luke 12:18). In addition, they might

set out vines (1 Cor. 9:7) and then cultivate, water, and prune them (Luke 13:7; 1 Cor. 3:8; John 15:2), or they might make olive grafts (Rom. 11:17–18), water the oxen (Luke 13:15), spread manure (Luke 13:8), burn pruned branches (Matt. 7:19), or chop down nonproducing trees (Luke 3:9). Similarly, herders had to watch their flocks (Luke 2:8), which included chasing after strays (Luke 15:4), digging pits to trap marauding wolves (Matt. 12:11), and separating sheep and goats at nightfall (Matt. 25:32). Fishermen could be found throwing their nets into the water (Mark 1:16), hauling in fish (Luke 5:6–7), sorting fish (Matt. 13:48), or washing and mending nets (Matt. 4:21; Mark 1:19). Women in the villages were busy too, spinning and weaving (Matt. 6:28), mending old clothes (Mark 2:21), grinding meal (Matt. 24:41; Luke 17:35), making bread (Matt. 13:33), sweeping the house (Luke 15:8), or going out to a well for water (John 4:7). On occasion, they might earn some money as mourners for one who had died (Mark 5:38).

Not only the number of tasks but many details about them make clear that the lives of farmers, herders, and fishermen were hard—a far cry from the leisure of the urban landowners. At any rate, many tasks were physically demanding, such as digging (Luke 16:3). There was also the scorching sun (Matt. 20:12; Rev. 7:16) or, in the case of shepherds and fishermen, working the whole night through (Luke 2:8; 5:5; John 21:3). What is more, these workers toiled on diets near subsistence level. At times, the land produced not abundance but thorns (Heb. 6:8; cf. Matt. 7:16) and fishing nets

came up empty (Luke 5:5; John 21:3). Consequently, even sparrows could become a meal (Matt. 10:29), and some might be tempted to eat the pods fed to swine (Luke 15:15–16). Not surprisingly, famine was always a specter (Luke 15:14; Acts 11:28; Rev. 6:8). Thus a prayer for “daily bread” was literally appropriate (Matt. 6:11; Luke 11:3).

Agricultural workers, however, had more to face than hard work, long hours, and little food. Herders had to contend with wolves and brigands (Matt. 7:15; John 10:8, 10), fishermen with squalls (Mark 4:37), and everyone with fraudulent tax collectors and their brutal soldiers (Luke 3:11–14; 19:8). In addition, a householder might withhold the wages of those who had harvested his crops (James 5:4), and when those from the countryside went to the city they could be compelled to do some task (Mark 15:21; cf. Matt. 5:41) or even be misidentified as a brigand (cf. Luke 22:52) and summarily executed (Luke 23:21). Thus the overall impression is one of most people toiling incessantly in the countryside in order that a few householders and their families in the city might live in ease and extravagance.

Commerce in the Wilderness

The third of the general categories for organizing the New Testament evidence regarding the ancient economic conditions is the wilderness. If the countryside is the productive land that immediately surrounds and supplies the city, then the wilderness is the more

distant and nonproductive land that extends beyond the countryside in all directions. As nonproductive land, the wilderness could consist of desert, such as the barren land in the Jordan Valley near the Dead Sea (Mark 1:4; cf. John 11:54) or the Arabian Desert (1 Cor. 10:1–5). Yet the term “wilderness” does not usually imply literal desert; it simply refers to any nonproductive area, such as very hilly, mountainous, or otherwise isolated land (Matt. 15:33; 2 Cor. 11:26). It can even refer to formerly productive and populated areas (Matt. 12:25; Luke 21:20).

Still, to say that wilderness is economically unproductive land is not to deny its economic role. A wilderness might be crossed by roads on which traders and other travelers would move (Luke 10:30–33). Such travelers were exposed to attack by brigands who seem to have operated at will in these distant and isolated areas (Luke 10:30; 2 Cor. 11:26). Indeed, from the safety of their wilderness hideouts, brigands might make forays into the countryside to attack, say, the flocks of herders (John 10:1) and, if numerous and rapacious enough, they could pose a political threat (Acts 5:36–37; 21:38). Despite this apparent inhospitable character, the wilderness is sometimes regarded as a place for repentance and renewal (Mark 1:2–6) or retreat (Mark 1:35).

Summary and Conclusion

In New Testament times, there was some considerable commercialization, as reflected in the description of Rome and its

merchants presented in Revelation 18. Still, the economy remained fundamentally tied to agriculture. Other than the activities of free artisans and shopkeepers in the cities (and rural villages) and of brigand gangs in the wilderness, the vast majority of people lived as farmers, herders, and fishermen in the countryside surrounding a city and worked on land that was usually owned by the urban aristocracy who lived—and lived well—off its surplus. The two groups—the producers of wealth and the consumers of it—were related socially through the institution of the household and surrounded geographically by economically marginal hills, mountains, and deserts (the wilderness).

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