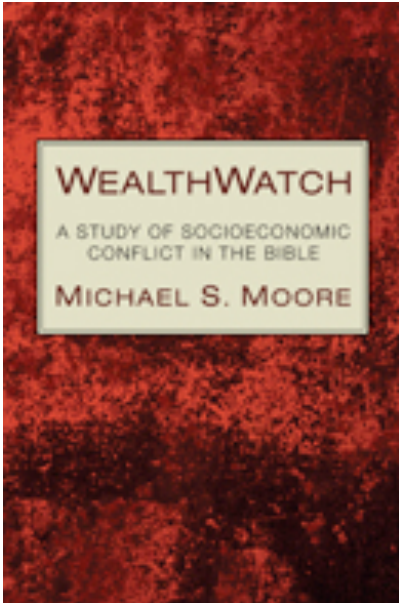


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Moore, Michael S.

WealthWatch: A Study of Socioeconomic Conflict in the Bible

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Michael S. Moore's *WealthWatch* offers a very interesting approach to uncovering biblical attitudes toward wealth, possessions, and the conflicts that they often create. To achieve this end, Moore turns to some of the great epics of the ancient Near East through which to explore several biblical texts that address socioeconomic conflict, and to great effect. Moore then uses the findings of his study to argue that these ancient writings hold untapped resources that can be effectively used to address a number of today's economical and ethical concerns.

Moore opens in his introduction (1–25) by addressing the significant complexities that are involved working to uncover biblical and extrabiblical attitudes toward wealth in the ancient Near East, offering a number of caveats to his study, not least of which is how a twentieth-century economic paradigm of capitalism versus communism can lead us to ask the wrong questions when looking at ancient economics. Taking care to accommodate readers who might be unfamiliar with *WealthWatch's* subject matter, Moore introduces such common challenges in biblical studies as issues of historicity and divergent views as to how the Hebrew Bible developed. Through engaging these challenges head-on, Moore builds the groundwork for an honest engagement with his readers as he starts to uncover

what he considers to be the *socioeconomic DNA* that is embedded within the Bible and in other ancient Near East writings.

Moore launches his study in chapter 2, “Socioeconomic Conflict Motifs in Ancient Near Eastern Epics” (26–99), by reading the great ancient Near East epics of Gilgamesh, Atrahasis, and the Epic of Erra through Karl Polanyi’s sociological notion of the “big problems” of society. Further demonstrating the honesty with which he undertakes this very complex study, Moore opens with a bullet-point list of assumptions through which he approaches the ancient myths, such as his view that the authors imagined their gods in their own images and that myths gave their authors a place to express criticism of royal policies and develop theological arguments.

In a thorough treatment of the Epic of Gilgamesh, Moore works to reveal an underlying theme of socioeconomic conflict that threatened Babylonian society: the wild man (Enkidu) working to invade and live off the land and the civilized businessman (Gilgamesh) who, in turn, attempts to keep him out in order to protect profits. In his treatment of the Atrahasis Epic, Moore reads this poem, in which lesser gods rebel against the unjust labor demands of greater gods, as a reflection of earthly labor-management relations. Lastly, in the Epic of Erra, Moore uncovers a warning about the revolutionary consequences of city dwellers showing contempt toward those who live and work in the fields. Establishing the “big problems” of corruption, management-labor relations, and contempt in these epics as a starting point, Moore turns his attention of this study to the Hebrew Bible to see if its texts reflect common socioeconomic concerns.

Working in chapter 3, “Socioeconomic Conflict Motifs in the Hebrew Bible” (100–167), to transcend what he views as the extremes of either fragmenting the Bible to the point that any literary framework is lost or treating the Bible as a “‘holy book’ written by ‘holy authors’ living inside a ‘holy bubble,’” Moore examines the stories of Cain and Abel, Abraham and Lot, Jacob and Esau, and the exodus to reveal socioeconomic conflicts that exist in both the ancient and modern world. By reading these biblical stories through the lens of Gilgamesh, Atrahasis, and Erra, Moore finds conflicts that existed in other areas of the ancient Near East: conflict between competing vocations attempting to work the same land and tensions between city dwellers and those who work in the fields. The chapter concludes with a fascinating reading of the exodus that distills a Yahwistic economic imperative that denounces attempts to acquire desired possessions with disregard for one’s neighbor or to protect one’s interests through systems of bribery.

The focus of chapter 4, “Socioeconomic Conflict Motifs in Early Jewish Texts” (168–201), is on how Alexander the Great’s fourth-century invasion into Syria-Palestine caused socioeconomic upheaval throughout the region, challenging long-established norms of

economic behavior. Noting a scarcity of research on socioeconomic conflict motifs in 1 and 2 Maccabees, Moore attempts to fill the gap, displaying how these texts serve as prime examples of a struggle against the socioeconomic problems of acquisition, contempt, corruption, bribery, and slavery. Moore outlines how 1 and 2 Maccabees take the reader on a Hellenistic-inspired drive away from the principles of the Yahwistic economic imperative through the stories of Jason's reliance on bribery to achieve power, Antiochus's contempt for Jerusalem, and then a return to the ideals of the law through the stories of Mattathias's abandonment of Jerusalem (the city) for the wilderness and Judas's commitment to giving firstfruits and tithes from the spoils of war to the destitute. Moore then explains how this move away from Hellenistic influence on Jewish communities is continued in Qumran's Damascus Document, Rule of Community, Habakkuk Commentary, and the Thanksgiving Scroll, where we find "big problems" of acquisition, bribery, corruption, deprivation, and slavery being condemned.

In chapter 5, "Socioeconomic Conflict Motifs in the Greek New Testament" (202–22), Gospel parables such as the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37), the Master and His Slaves (12:35–48), and the Prudent Manager (16:1–13) are used to illustrate how Jesus took a compassionate approach to addressing socioeconomic conflicts in a more "puritan" religious environment. Moore argues that Jesus' interpretations reveal a use of scripture that strives to navigate halakah (laws or legal decisions given in a particular instance but adopted as generic rules for the entire legal system) and haggadah (attempts to interpret meaning, values, and ideas that underlie the specific distinctions that govern religious life). Through the parable of the Good Samaritan, for example, Moore explores Jesus' thoughts on how to handle those situations in which purity laws come into tension with individual care, highlighting that when such conflicts arise the latter should take precedence over the former. Whereas much of the religious establishment gravitated toward a halakic approach to socioeconomic problems, Jesus offered a "prophet/sage" approach that encouraged people to develop the wisdom to make decisions of their own as they tried to live up to God's will.

Moore concludes (223–31) by narrowing the socioeconomic conflict motifs that he finds within biblical and the ancient Near East epics to the "big problems" of corruption, bribery, slavery, and addiction, citing examples of how these concerns were not only of great importance in the ancient world but affect billions of lives today. Using the Corruption Perceptions Index to consider the effects of corruption in the modern world, Moore demonstrates how the effects of modern-day corruption gives relevance to both biblical and ancient Near East epics. Moore uses the "big problem" of debt slavery in the modern world, as found as a result of personal catastrophe or sometimes divorce, as an example of how these ancient texts are applicable to the concerns that we face today but remain a largely untapped resource for justice.

Moore has produced a valuable resource that not only enhances conversations on how biblical texts can address modern economic injustice, but he also takes the discussion in exciting new directions. By leaving the usual suspects of Bible and justice to the side (e.g., prophetic texts against economic exploitation, Naboth's vineyard) and delving into stories from the Torah that may not appear economic on the surface, *WealthWatch* offers new insights into ancient Near Eastern socioeconomic conflict. By using extrabiblical epics as a control for his thesis, Moore highlights that the stories of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament do not represent communities that were isolated or uninfluenced by their neighbors in facing economic conflict. The book's concluding chapter effectively illustrates how the Torah and ancient Near Eastern epics have significant value in addressing injustice in the world today, despite the gulf of time and culture that exists between their authorship and the modern reader.

A question that naturally arises in reading *WealthWatch* is whether the author is actually uncovering socioeconomic problems within the texts or if the study is guilty of eisegesis. While this concern is entirely valid, Moore does an effective job of mitigating it through the transparency that he brings to this candid study that confronts the limitations that we face in working to understand socioeconomic conflict in the ancient Near East. In addition to being creatively written, *WealthWatch* is well annotated for those who wish to pursue further research in this area at either the graduate or professional level. It is my hope that *WealthWatch* is the start of a conversation that Moore, and others, will continue.