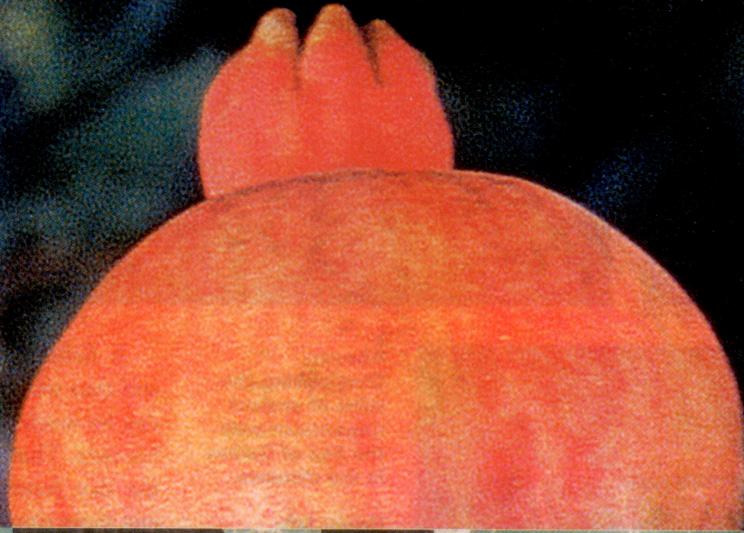


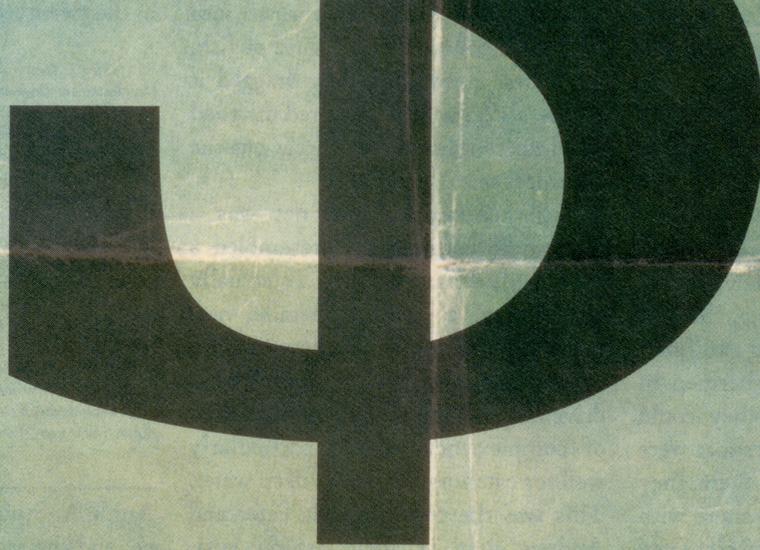


ETB: Ecclesiastes 5:8-6:12



ACQUIRING WEALTH

in the Ancient Near East



By Claude F. Mariottini

MESOPOTAMIA WAS THE CRADLE OF civilization. The land between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers gave birth to the great societies of the ancient Near East. Archaeology has revealed that in the fourth and third millennium B.C. several city-states, such as those of the Akkadians, Sumerians, and Babylonians, flourished in Mesopotamia. These ancient empires created an advanced system of irrigation that greatly increased their agricultural output. The civilizations of Mesopotamia also invented writing, built great palaces and temples, and developed trade with other city-states.

In the Ancient Near East

One of the most important factors in the creation of wealth in the ancient Near East was the fertility of the land. The irrigation system the Babylonians used helped produce plentiful harvests of wheat, fruits, and vegetables. Another major industry was textile manufacturing, the by-products of which the Babylonians used in trade for other goods. Buying and selling these products contributed to the wealth of the people who produced them. The basis for trade in antiquity was barter and the exchange of manufactured goods since coinage was not in use until the seventh century B.C.

The surplus of agricultural products and manufactured goods enabled Mesopotamian cities to grow rich through trade and commerce. The accumulation of wealth by nations and individuals created demand for metals and for skilled workers who could create monuments, jewelry, and works of art. National and personal wealth also provided the funds to build magnificent palaces and temples.¹

The growth of wealth generated the stratification of society. The Code of Hammurabi, a code of law that Hammurabi, king of Babylon, composed in the first half of the eighteenth century B.C., shows that Babylonian society was divided into three groups of people: the members of landholding families; citizens who were free but did not possess land; and slaves, people who did not own land and were not free.

As a whole, the people who had power and authority in society were those who controlled more land and who were able to accumulate more wealth. Kings and their courtiers; priests, whose loyalties were always to the deities' temples; and members of the ruling elite were the primary ones to amass and retain wealth. The ruling elite controlled



Left: Full-size replica of the stele of Hammurabi. In codifying his rules, Hammurabi divided people into three groups: persons who owned land, free citizens who owned no land, and those who were not free and

owned no land.

Above: Farmland beside the Euphrates River at Dura-Europos in southeast Syria. Founded in about 300 B.C., Dura-Europos became an important stop on the east-west trade route.

agricultural production, which was the basis of wealth and power. People in government managed the food supply which they received as tax payments from the populace. Rulers used surplus food for both trade and personal consumption. Collecting taxes required keeping records. The invention of writing emerged out of the need for record-keeping in commercial transactions and governmental affairs.²

In Israel

In the early days of Israel's settlement in Canaan, the accumulation and the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few individuals probably did not exist. The reason for this equality was because each individual's wealth

came from the land. Food production occurred among families within the clans to meet the basic needs of individual families. Most people cultivated crops and had livestock to provide for their own needs. If they produced a surplus, they then used the extra for small trade among the members of the clan, primarily for items they did not cultivate or goods the family did not produce.

Moses described the abundance of the promised land:

For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with streams of water, springs, and deep water sources, flowing in both valleys and hills; a land of wheat, barley, vines, figs, and pomegranates; a land of olive oil and honey; a land where you will eat food without shortage, where you will lack nothing; a land whose rocks are iron and from whose hills you will mine copper. (Deut. 8:7-9)³

Thus, the richness of the land was available to every individual Israelite. Buying and selling land was rare, as evident in the story of Naboth (1 Kings 21:1-3).

In Israel the measure of a person's wealth consisted mostly of flocks, herds, and slaves. Abraham was a rich man because he had many "sheep and cattle, silver and gold, male and female slaves, and camels and donkeys" (Gen. 24:35). Esau took his cattle and livestock and moved away from his brother Jacob because their wealth was too great for them to live together (36:6-8).

Nabal was "a very rich man" because he had three thousand sheep and one thousand goats (1 Sam. 25:2). Job's wealth was much greater than Nabal's. Job had seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred donkeys, and many servants (Job 1:3).

To preserve and protect their wealth, people needed a large retinue. Job had "a very large number of servants" (v. 3). Abraham had 318 men born in his house (Gen. 14:14). These men, who probably were free-born servants and slaves working for Abraham, had fathers and mothers, wives and

children. Thus Abraham's retinue possibly numbered more than one thousand people.

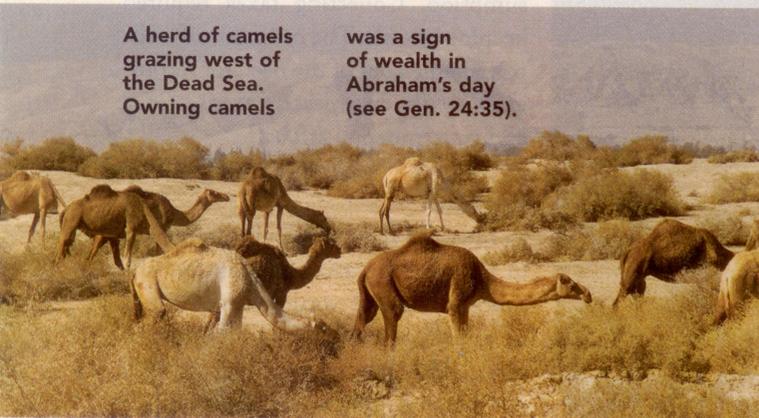
The establishment of the monarchy in Israel created a group of people who became wealthy by their service to the king and by the gifts they received from their service to the monarch. The monarchy also forced families to accumulate a surplus beyond their immediate need in order to pay taxes, to support the government, and to provide for the king's needs.⁴

At the time Samuel appointed Saul as Israel's first king, he warned the people that the king would accumulate his wealth at their expense. Samuel said:

He can take your best fields, vineyards, and olive orchards and give them to his servants. He can take a tenth of your grain and your vineyards and give them to his officials and servants. He can take your male servants, your female servants, your best young men, and your donkeys and use them for his work. He can take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves can become his servants. (1 Sam. 8:14-17)

When Solomon became the king of the united monarchy, he promoted economic growth by establishing commercial ventures with Tyre. These ventures helped the people who were part of Solomon's government to accumulate personal wealth. Solomon established a fleet of ships at Ezion-geber (1 Kings 9:26). Solomon used his ships to increase the trade of products such as gold, precious stones, and rare woods (10:11). In addition, Solomon traded exotic animals such as apes and peacocks (v. 22).

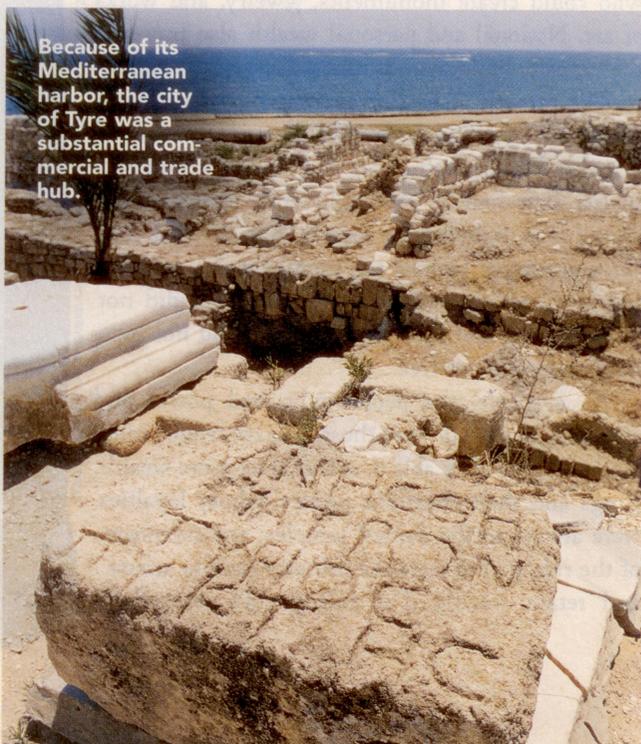
In the ancient Near East, the people who owned the land were much richer than those who cultivated it. This



A herd of camels grazing west of the Dead Sea. Owning camels

was a sign of wealth in Abraham's day (see Gen. 24:35).

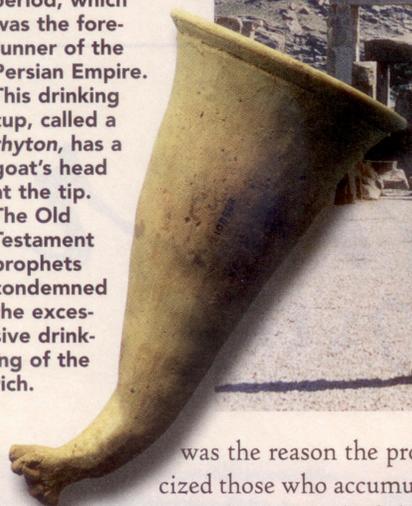
ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ MIKE RUTHERFORD (157/1894)



Because of its Mediterranean harbor, the city of Tyre was a substantial commercial and trade hub.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BOB SCHATZ (26/344/8)

Below: Zoomorphic cups, plates, and bowls were popular during the Achaemenid period, which was the forerunner of the Persian Empire. This drinking cup, called a *rhyton*, has a goat's head at the tip. The Old Testament prophets condemned the excessive drinking of the rich.



Constructed to impress visitors, the audience hall in the palace of Persepolis was designed by Darius I. Measuring

about 200x200 feet, the great hall had 72 columns, each about 62 feet tall, 13 of which still stand today.

Persepolis was the ceremonial capital of the Achaemenid Dynasty (lasted about 550–330 B.C.).

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO (23/1/21)

was the reason the prophets severely criticized those who accumulated land by joining “house to house” and “field to field” (Isa. 5:8). Those relegated to working these expansive fields and large estates would have been the slaves, day laborers, and people who sold themselves to pay their debts.

By the eighth century B.C., wealth had become an instrument that served to oppress the less fortunate in Israelite society. This happened when people forgot that the Lord was the One who gave them power to accumulate wealth. The criticism by prophets such as Isaiah, Amos, and Micah shows that the people of Israel were better off economically before the enactment of policies that contributed to the accumulation of wealth by a few individuals. The prophets condemned the wealthy for their luxurious houses (Amos 3:15), excessive drinking (Isa. 5:11), entertainment (v. 12), and jewelry (3:16–24).

Wealth in the Book of Ecclesiastes

In Ecclesiastes 5:8–6:12, the writer exposed the person who has an insatiable desire to acquire more money. He also discussed how deceptive the accumulation of wealth can be to an individual whose only desire in life is to acquire a fortune. Those whose primary aim is to acquire wealth will never be happy because they are never satisfied with what they have (Eccl. 5:10).

Some of the people who were greedy for money were provincial government officials, who oppressed the peasants by overtaxing them (v. 8). The phrase “the profit from the land is taken by all” (v. 9) may refer to the heavy taxation that provided revenue for the government and for those working for the king.⁵

Wealth leads to pride (Ezek. 28:5). Those who were oppressing the poor in Israel believed they had acquired their

wealth by their own power and ability (Deut. 8:17). The writer of Ecclesiastes explained that wealth was a gift from God (Eccl. 5:19). Moses told the people of Israel that the source of their wealth was God: “Remember that the LORD your God gives you the power to gain wealth” (Deut. 8:18).

The Bible teaches that God gives wealth but that He also can take wealth away: “I will give up your wealth and your treasures as plunder, without cost” (Jer. 15:13). The psalmist said that when people die, they leave their wealth behind: “For one can see that wise men die; foolish and stupid men also pass away. Then they leave their wealth to others” (Ps. 49:10). This is what the writer of Ecclesiastes also emphasized: “As he came from his mother’s womb, so he will go again, naked as he came; he will take nothing for his efforts that he can carry in his hands” (Eccl. 5:15).

What the writer of Ecclesiastes was teaching was that people who enrich themselves by dishonest means and who gain wealth by oppressing the less fortunate are outwardly rich but inwardly poor. Further, he was teaching that those whose sole focus was the accumulation of wealth would find that this quest for more was ultimately an insatiable thirst.⁶

1. John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 34.
2. Ronald Wallenfels, ed., *The Ancient Near East: An Encyclopedia for Students* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2000), 4:170.
3. All Scripture references are from the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB).
4. John Bright, *The Kingdom of God: The Biblical Concept and Its Meaning for the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1953), 38–40.
5. James L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987), 118.
6. Christopher J. H. Wright, *An Eye for an Eye: The Place of Old Testament Ethics Today* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 72–73.

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