

Provisions against wealth and poverty in Plato's Cretan city and in ancient Israel: A comparison of the *Book of Deuteronomy* with Plato's *Nomoi*

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The way in which a nation's economy is structured is of great importance for the material welfare of its people as well as the people's relationship with the state and the operation of the state itself. It is also important for the proper functioning of a nation as a people and its psychological welfare. If the gap between rich and poor increases, the structure of an economy, and therefore the welfare of the state and the nation, is at risk. Two important documents of antiquity, Plato's *Nomoi* and the *Book of Deuteronomy*, which even today influence life, dealt intensively with the fissures between rich and poor within society as a danger to political welfare and harmony. This article will examine these documents to make use of these two books for improving a societal situation. This will be done by a comparative perspective on both of these books.

Keywords: Plato; Moses; Wealth and poverty; Old Testaments; Deuteronomy, Political philosophy.

Introduction: *Deuteronomy* and Plato's *Nomoi* – Their correspondence

The structure of the organisation of the economy is not only most important for the material welfare of the people of a nation, but also for their psychological welfare and the harmony in the political organisation of the state. Two important documents of antiquity, Plato's *Nomoi* and the *Book of Deuteronomy*, which even today influence life, dealt intensively with the fissures between rich and poor within society as a danger to political welfare and harmony. To make use of these two books for improving a societal situation, we have to liberate, on the one hand, Plato's *Nomoi* from narrow perspectives of purely philosophical discussions, and on the other hand, the *Book of Deuteronomy* from too narrow perspectives of theological biblicists. The best way of deliverance from such approaches is a comparative perspective on both of these books, and to organise a kind of discourse between the 'Athenian Stranger' in Plato's *Nomoi*, who, as already Aristotle had observed, represents Plato himself, and Moses, who was regarded to be the author of the *Book of Deuteronomy*. The choice for such a dialogical perspective is legitimised by both books being as deeply dialogic in substance as they respectively are. In Plato's *Nomoi*, the Athenian Stranger, representing the Ionian background of Plato's Athens, is discussing the presuppositions for a happy life in harmony and for a cohesive society with his two Doric partners from Crete and Sparta, on their way in Crete from Knossos to the Idaic grotto of Zeus. The *Book of Deuteronomy* represents Moses' dialogue with the divine revelation at Mount Sinai, which he is expounding for the people of Israel in the land of Moab. Each of the two books was construed as a plan for a new society expected in the future. Plato designs his *Nomoi* as a legal construction for a new colony of Knossos which shall be founded in Crete, and the *Book of Deuteronomy* is designed as Moses' speech to his people in the land of Moab before their crossing the river Jordan for a new life in the Promised Land. These are not the only formal correspondences between these two books. Both represent a kind of testament of their authors. The *Nomoi* was Plato's last book before he died, and it was edited by Phillipus of Opus, if not even finished.¹ The *Book of Deuteronomy* is cast as Moses' last day, as a testament for the Torah of the Pentateuch before he has to die in the land of Moab (Otto 2017:2261–2285). Both these books are utopian outlines of a better society, including better economic behaviour on the part of citizens, but this does not mean

1. For the share of Phillipus of Opus in Plato's *Nomoi*, cf. the discussion in Morrow (1993:515–518). This literary historical discussion is of substantial relevance for the theological Book X of the *Nomoi*, but not for the economical passages especially in Book V.

Note: The collection entitled 'Eben Scheffler Festschrift', sub-edited by Jurie H. le Roux (University of Pretoria) and Christo Lombaard (University of South Africa).

that they were being unrealistic.² Plato wrote his *Nomoi* for the sake of improving the Athenian society of the 4th century, when Plato was disappointed of the oligarchic government of the Thirty, on the one hand, and the development of the Athenian democracy, on the other hand, which had followed on the oligarchy, but very soon showed traits of decay, suffering from the influence of groups of nouveau-riches, the *philokteanôtetes*, greedy for wealth, as it was described in Aristophanes' comedies of the Wasps (*sphêkes*) and Pluto. The *Book of Deuteronomy* in its late post-exilic 'final' shape of the 4th century BCE, which was therefore a near-contemporary document to Plato's Cretan city of the *Nomoi*, which was written shortly after 352 BCE, was also written to secure the Judean society from foreign impacts on Judean identity and organisation (cf. Crouch 2012:541–554; Finsterbusch 2016:109–131). Both books revitalise older traditions: Plato drew on the ethical values of Athens in the 6th and 5th centuries, especially of the Draconic and Solonic period; the authors of the post-exilic *Book of Deuteronomy* employed traditions of the pre-exilic period, especially of the time of Josiah, which were then preserved in this book (Otto 2012a:231–257).

Plato's Cretan Magnesia, a city without poverty and excessive wealth

In designing his Cretan city Magnesia, Plato is guided by the insight that excessive property and wealth, on the one hand, and extreme poverty, on the other hand, are a universal source of factions (*staseis*) in a society and its disruption. Plato construes the organisation of the economy of Magnesia in such a way that the extremes of excessive wealth and deep poverty are avoided.³ He starts with the geographical decision where in Creta Magnesia, the colony of Knossos, should be founded, and Plato decides that it shall be located far away from the coasts, so that for the Magnesians there will be no direct access to a harbour and to overseas trade.

The economy and society of Magnesia shall be based on the agriculture of an *oikos*-economy and not on overseas trading and the exchange of goods, but on labour on the fields. To prevent extremes of poverty and wealth, the agrarian economy has to be structured in a way that it supports an equalisation of landed property. The farmland shall be divided into 5040 portions of lots (*klêroi*), with one lot for each family (*Nomoi* V 739b–741e). Each land lot shall become the property of a single family, although it theoretically remains property of the state and the gods, so that the land cannot be sold by the family and the families cannot buy any other land lot or parts of it (Morrow 1993:95–112). The acceptance of a lot is confirmed by a solemn religious ceremony with threefold sacrifices and prayers (Schöpsdau 2003:317f.), for the land has to remain in the family forever as

2.As for this point, Plato's *Nomoi* differs from his older *Politeia*.

3.For Plato's model of an ideal economy, cf. Schriefl (2013a, 2013b:105–122).

source for the livelihood of its members.⁴ Two-thirds of the annual harvest of the land lot will be reserved for the members of the family and their slaves, and one-third is subject to compulsory sale to alien residents, that is, the metics, and foreign visitors. The reason for this regulation of distribution of the annual harvest is the fact that in Plato's Cretan city the citizens are not allowed to work in any kind of profession of paid labour, which has to be done by metics. And as by the principle of ideopraxy the citizens of Magnesia are not allowed to have more than one profession, that is, as farmers on their lots, they cannot become craftsmen or traders on the markets at the same time.

The reason for this principle of ideopraxy, with its limitation to only one profession, is Plato's intention to keep the citizens of Magnesia away from any chance to earn much money and to become rich because Plato is wary of a development of his ideal state into a state governed by a plutocratic oligarchy of the wealthy.

On the contrary, Plato does no longer, as in the *Politeia*, favour the ideal of a strict economic equity of all the citizens of Magnesia, but introduces four property classes of property of movable goods. The basic evaluation (*timêma*), on which the classes depend, shall be the value of the land lots, which are of equal worth. The members of the lowest class shall possess goods equivalent to the value of their lot and not less.

The members of the highest class are allowed to possess fourfold the basic valuation, as result of modest money making or because of gifts or a lucky find on the field. Any surplus above this maximum has to be delivered to the city and its gods, that is, the temples. Any violation of this rule would be punished with forfeiture of the *duplum* of the surplus. This division of four property classes has only minor implication for the election of magistrates, so that these officials do not negatively affect the democratic rights of the citizens in the lower classes. Plato intensively argues against any kind of oligarchic procedures that would privilege wealthy citizens for the magistrate of the city, so that Aristotle's reproach (*Politeia* II 6 1226a12) that Plato's property classes give the *Nomoi* an oligarchic character is the result of a misinterpretation. To strengthen the barriers against any oligarchic and plutocratic influence in Magnesia, Plato provides a particular currency of Magnesian money which cannot be changed into other Greek or international currencies. At the same time, the possession of gold and silver is forbidden in Plato's Cretan city. The local markets, which shall be run by metics and which are necessary for the livelihood of the slaves and the metics, are to be protected against any provisions that aim at a maximisation of profit. Advertising the goods shall be not allowed. Any change of prices during the day, if the demand is strong and the goods run short, is forbidden. Also, payment by instalment shall not be allowed.

4.It is not accurate to speak of communism in Plato's *Nomoi*, as it was suggested by Von Pöhlmann (1925:180f.). Plato thought of a kind of limited private property or a public property with private exploitation; cf. the discussions in Lauffer (1936:242–244) and Morrow (1993:105–107).

Plato's outline of the economy of his Cretan city is based on a theory of anthropology, which is, for Plato, primarily a theory of the soul (*psychê*), and on a catalogue of values which are derived from his anthropology and theology. Chrematistics and wealth as the lowest of all the values, according to Plato, are a danger for the harmony of the soul because all kind of chrematistics that aim at a maximisation of profit disturb the harmony of the bi- or tripartite *psychê*. Plato interprets the soul as composed of two parts: a lower self, an *epithumeitikon*, that is, a motivational structure of appetite reacting to mere pleasures and pains,⁵ and a higher self, a *logistikon* of *phronesis*, that is, a motivation by reason, taking in and responding to arguments and truth, as demonstrated by his marionette parable in *Nomoi* 644c–645a:

Let us conceive of the matter in this way: Let us suppose that each of us living human beings is an ingenious puppet of the gods, whether contrived by way of a toy of theirs or of some serious purpose – for as to that we know nothing; but this we do know, that these inward affections of ours, like sinews or cords, drag us along and, being opposed to each other, pull one against the other to opposite actions; and herein lies the dividing line between goodness and badness. For, as our argument declares, there is one of these pulling forces which every man should always follow and nohow leave hold of, counteracting thereby the pull of the other sinews: it is the leading-string, golden and holy, of reason, entitled the public law of the state; and whereas the other cords are hard and steely and of every possible shape and semblance, this one is flexible and uniform, since it is of gold. With that most excellent leading-string of the law we must needs co-operate always; for since reason is excellent, but gentle rather than forceful, its leading-string needs helpers to ensure that the golden kind within us may vanquish the other kinds. In this way our story comparing ourselves to puppets will not fall flat, and the meaning of the terms 'self-superior' and 'self-inferior' will become somewhat more clear, and also how necessary it is for the individual man to grasp the true account of these inward pulling forces and to live in accordance therewith, and how necessary for the state, when it has received such an account either from a god or from a man who knows to make this into a law for itself and be guided thereby.

Plato's parable demonstrates that the lower self of the *epithumeitikon*, represented by the iron strings, is stronger but less worthy than the golden string, representing the upper self of the *logistikon*, so that it requires the support by law as an incorporation of *nous*.⁶ Covetousness and greediness for wealth is a motivation of the lower self of the soul, which can become, for Plato, a primary motivation in all the soul and lead to a reduction of the upper self of reasoning and virtues. The latter is the basis of a happy life in harmony of all parts of the soul, under the guidance of the upper self and the higher intelligible order of the cosmos. An anarchy in the soul through greediness for wealth and political influence based on wealth leads to a materialistic worldview which separates nature from human culture, interpreting reason (*nous*) as a

5. Fossheim (2013:98–101) counts with a third part of the psyche, which he calls *thumoeideticly*, concerned with self-esteem and pride. For Plato's economic theory, the discourse about his distribution of two or three parts of the soul is less important.

6. For an interpretation of the marionette-parable, cf. Shariar (1998:97–131); Frede (2010:108–126); Bobonich (2013:30–33).

human agreement serving partial human interests. In this manner, Plato connects his outline of Magnesia and its laws and institutions with a theology of the divine *nous* as origin of the cosmic *nous* and reason in the soul of the upper human self (Bordt 2006:167–250).

The brotherly economy in the *Book of Deuteronomy*

At about the same time that Plato wrote his *Nomoi*, shortly after 352 BCE, post-exilic authors of the *Book of Deuteronomy* were engaged with the rereading and reinterpretation of this Book, which had originated in the late pre-exilic period of the late seventh century BCE, at the time of Josiah's kingship, and had already been revised intensively in the six and fifth centuries. Although there had been no direct literary contact between these two books, they were both related to a heritage of common values of the Ancient Near East (Von Breda 2017).⁷ Hence, the authors in the *Book of Deuteronomy* develop in Deuteronomy 15:4 an utopian idea of a society in Israel without any poverty:

There will be no poor among you because YHWH your God will bless you in the land that YHWH your God gives you for an inheritance to possess, if only you obey the voice of YHWH and take care to do all this commandment which I give you today. For YHWH your God will bless you as he promised you, and you shall not borrow and you shall rule over many nations, but they will not rule over you.

The authors do not describe the social and economic reality in the Persian Province Jehud as it is described in Nehemiah 5:1–13. Here, Jewish citizens complain that increasing numbers of them are being enslaved, losing their freedom in settlement of their debts. Creditors to their own people even enslaving the sons and daughters of the debtors, which is a sign of the development of pauperisation among the people. The authors of Deuteronomy 15:4–6 contradict this development by means of a utopia, with the divine promise of a society without any poverty. The authors describe two interrelated ways of how this promise will become reality. On the one hand, God will bless those who keep his command and listen to his voice, which speaks to the addressees of Moses in the narrated time in Moab and the addressees of the *Book of Deuteronomy* in the time of narration in the Persian period.⁸ The command which YHWH had given is related by means of the anaphoric demonstrative 'all this commandment' in Deuteronomy 15:5 to the commandment that the creditors shall release the debts of the fellow citizens every seventh year, in Deuteronomy 15:1–3 (Otto 2016:1354f.). The divine promise of a coming society in the future without any poverty must not be an excuse not to renounce the debts with the argument because *à la longue* YHWH will solve the

7. The extent of the reception of Ancient Near Eastern proverbs in Hesiod's *erga kai hemera* is a matter of discussions; cf. Dornseiff (1934:35–69) and Schmitz (2004:311–333). For Ancient Near Eastern influences on Drakon and Solon in Athens, cf. Barta (2011a:81–84; 2011b:217–277) and already Mühl (1933).

8. For the hermeneutics of narrated time and time of narration, and hence the double meaning of the term 'today' in *Book of Deuteronomy*, see Otto (2012a:258–263); cf. also Braulik (2017:1121).

problems of the debtors. The ideal society will not come automatically, by divine blessing, but its realisation will also depend on acts of brotherly ethos by the citizens, according to God's commandments. Economic equality beyond poverty will be realised by renouncing any attempt to realise profit by taking advantage of the situation of poverty of fellow citizens, as stated in Deuteronomy 15:11:⁹ 'For there are still needy ones in your land, which is why I command you: open your hand to the poor and needy brother in your land'. The command in Deuteronomy 23:20–21, not to charge any interest from a fellow citizen, complements the commandments in Deuteronomy 15:

You shall not lend at interest to your brother, no matter whether the loan is of money or anything else that can earn interest. To an outsider you may lend at interest, but to your brother you are not to lend at interest, so that YHWH your God will prosper you in everything you set out to do in the land you are entering in order to take possession of it.

This commandment is, as those in Deuteronomy 15 are, part of the brotherly and sisterly ethics of the *Book of Deuteronomy*, which aim at a new way of economic behaviour, different from that which was usual in the days of the earlier authors of the *Book of Deuteronomy*. This prohibition to lend at interest becomes Moses' interpretation of the limitation of mortgage and also the prohibition of usury in the Covenant Code in Exod 22:20–26 (Otto 1994:84–86). Loans without interest were also known in cuneiform law, for instance in the Law Collection of Ešnunna in § 19 (Otto 1988:38f.), which were given to neighbours in cases of emergency. The authors of the *Book of Deuteronomy* universalise this Ancient Near Eastern institution of liable aid in distress, now to become a general requirement of economic behaviour in Jehud, which parallels Plato's economic axioms in *Nomoi* 742c:

No one shall deposit money with anyone he does not trust, nor lend money at interest, since it is permissible for the borrower to refuse entirely to pay back either interest or principal.

Plato does not prohibit giving loans at interest, but he does not provide any legal security for loan and interest, and no legal protection will be granted for any contracts and claims of repayment. They shall not be enforceable by a legal process (Morrow 1993:106). The authors in the *Book of Deuteronomy* are stricter than Plato, prohibiting any loans at interest at all between fellow citizens in Jehud. To deny any legal protection for any loans is, for Plato, only a 'second best' solution (*Nomoi* 739bc) because the best would be to abolish all private property (*Politeia* 556ab). Different from his *Politeia*, Plato is more realistic in the *Nomoi*, taking some negative traits of weakness in the lower self of the human soul into account, which contradicts an idealistic renunciation of all private property. Hence, all the more the danger that private property can hold for the harmony of the soul has to be domesticated by the constitution of the Cretan city and its economic laws. For Plato, credit business with foreigners shall be forbidden for Cretan citizens because this could be a fountain of wealth and an obstacle to gain *arête*, and this would mean to lose happiness in life:

⁹For the logic of the text of Deuteronomy 15:1–3.7–10.11 reading it synchronically, cf. Otto (2004:470–485).

I will never concede that the rich man is really happy if he is not good. It is impossible that a man is superlatively good, it is impossible that he should be also superlatively rich. (*Nomoi* 742c)

For the authors of the *Book of Deuteronomy*, the damage to society caused by unlimited greed for wealth and property is paralleled exactly by Plato's focus when he speaks of the damage that can be done to the soul by greediness for wealth. The authors of the *Book of Deuteronomy* put the commandments to release loans in the seventh year, and the probation of loans at interest, in Moses' mouth.

Conclusion: Moses and Plato meeting on the ground of an ethics of economy

The authors of the *Book of Deuteronomy* know very well the problems created for harmony in a brotherly and sisterly society by wealth on the one hand, and by poverty on the other hand. Therefore, they define it as the divine will, or as the divine *nous*, to reduce any striving for wealth, and reduce the fissure between rich and poor in society by means of the demand that the rich have to help the poor. Plato, for his part, knows of the damage any striving for wealth causes in the *psychê* of the citizens of his ideal Cretan city, and that this disharmony in the souls will cause a disharmony and *staseis* in the society, namely an oligarchy of wealthy citizens and a loss of democratic rights and freedom for all the citizens in Magnesia. This is nowadays, in the 21st century, as actual as it was in antiquity, as is the brotherly and sisterly ethics in the *Book of Deuteronomy*. Fifteen years ago, Eben Scheffler (2005) closed his lecture on Deuteronomy 15 and poverty in South Africa, at a conference of Old Testament scholars from the University of Pretoria and the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität in Munich, with these words:

Our endeavor to relate our contemplation on Deuteronomy 15 to the burning issues of poverty in Africa has shown that the critical and scientific study of the Pentateuch (as advocated by ProPent) need not be meaningless or a mere *Glasperlenspiel* (glass bead game) of intellectuals, with no relevance to the world and human suffering in the world. To the contrary, it can, while maintaining and actually exercising its intellectual responsibility, contribute to the alleviation of the plight of the poor. *Siyanqoba!* (p. 115)

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I declare that I am the sole author of this research article.

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Ethical consideration

This article followed all ethical standards for carrying out research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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