

Gender, Food Security and Trade

Biblical Insight and Encouragement

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Tyre – a global trade centre: from flourishing trade...

The Phoenician city of Tyre, with its two ports on the Eastern rim of the Mediterranean was one of the major trade centres in Old Testament (OT) times. The main period of long-distance trade lasted from the second half of the 8th century to the first half of the 6th century BC. From Tyre, trade routes led deep into the Arabian heartland and as far as China, North Africa, Spain and the Mediterranean islands. Even in the ancient Orient, long-distance trade produced prosperity and growth. The prophet Ezekiel worked in exile in Babylon from about 597 to 571 BC. He interpreted Tyre's trade in theological terms. The Book of Ezekiel (27.3-28,19) in the OT details the goods and trade routes and praises them in all their splendour. In 585-573 BC, the city had to capitulate before Nebuchadnezzar II, and in 332 BC, it was conquered and razed by Alexander the Great. Ezek. 27f. bemoans the sinking of the grand ship of Tyre and names two causes for the decline of flourishing trade. First, the king, owing to his trade successes, turned himself into God: "your heart has become proud in your wealth. [...] you compare your mind with the mind of a god" (28.5-6). Second, the king abuses his trading power for the purpose of exploitation: "In the abundance of your trade you were filled with violence and you sinned" (28.16).

... to oppression

King Solomon, too, was a trader. He partially owed his power to his policy of occupying significant trade routes and controlling them by military means (II Kings, 10.15). This confirms the natural affirmation of world trade, i.e. long-distance trade that goes beyond domestic trade; yet it also indicates Solomon's dangerous proximity to pure power politics. Trade agreements were a matter of course even in OT times, for instance between Israel's King Ahab and Damascus (I Kings 20.34). The slave trade, an offshoot of trade proper, particularly from Tyre, was heavily criticised in the prophetic tradition: "For you [Tyre] have taken my silver and my gold [...]. You have sold the people of Judah and Jerusalem to the Greeks" (Joel 3.5-6). Tyre "delivered entire communities over to Edom" (Amos 1.9). Moreover, there is criticism in the OT that profits are made particularly from trade and do not sufficiently accrue to producers. The merchants of Tyre's neighbouring trading city, Sidon, also brought home riches: "your revenue was the grain of Shihor, the harvest of the Nile" (Isa. 23.3).

Trade brought wealth and an increase in economy, but it also brought oppression.

Oppression of women and violating food security

- The "wise" king Salomo forced the non-Israelite men to work for him to build his temple and serve on his fleet of ships (I King 9, 21– forced labor without sufficient

payment. We can imagine that the women have been left alone at home to do the agricultural work and to guarantee food security.

- the farmers in Egypt were exploited, their food production was sold too cheap. International Trade of agricultural goods was the reason for the wealth in Tyre and the poverty in Egypt.
- Wealth inequality also led to extreme forms of polygamy. It's reported that King Salomo had 700 wives and 300 concubines (I King 11,3) whereas poor farmers could not afford to have one wife and to feed a family.
- Unfair trade leads to war and oppressive security systems.

Fair trade and modest faith as solution

After the destruction of the trade metropolis of Tyre – thus according to the prophet Isaiah – there will be opportunity for fairer trade.

- Tyre's "merchandise and her wages will be dedicated to the Lord; her profits will not be stored or hoarded, but her merchandise will supply abundant food and fine clothing for those who live in the presence of the Lord" (Isa. 23.18).
- After the fall of Tyre the farmers in Tharsis in Spain were encouraged by the prophet Isaia to replant their land, to overflow the land like the Nile in Egypt (Isaiah 23,10) instead of producing beaten silver and iron for the traders in Tyre (Jeremiah 10,9). "Food security first" was the slogan of the prophet 750 years before Christ! He showed a way where just trade can contribute to food security and gender justice.
- Most important for this new trade policy was to accept the limits of human action. Traders are not like God's! They have to accept to be democratically controlled. Fair trade is rooted in the faith in God as the enabling creator, the liberating and limiting power and the reconciling Christ. In this point the gender perspective means that men and women are called to strengthen together their faith in this liberating God.

Jesus: overthrown merchant tables by the Temple

This faith is also the basis of the trade vision in the New Testament (NT). Trade is regarded as a matter of course as much as in the OT. The NT's appeal to change our ways means turning towards God and to the justice of His kingdom. It is in this *spiritual* perspective – in the sense of a perspective that oriented towards God and thus towards fellow human beings in a new manner – that Jesus's casting out of the money-changers from the Temple, which is reported in all four gospels (Matt. 21.12 par), may well have to be seen. In this manner, Jesus directs trade back to its justified but also limited position on the way towards liberation and salvation. Once the view of God and His kingdom of justice is no longer obstructed by the merchants' tables, trade can again be an instrument in the service of justice.

The *prophetic* call for fair trade is renewed in the Epistle of James: "Listen! The wages of the labourers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out. [...] You have condemned and murdered the righteous one" (James 5.4-6).

Then again, trade is always seen in the *eschatological* perspective – i.e. the perspective that takes into account the final things – of the coming kingdom of God. The parable of the money placed in trust until the return of the king (Luke 19.11-27) makes this appeal: "Do business with these until I come back." (13). The natural activities of this world are supposed to be continued, yet not in one's self-interest but in the service of God. This eschatological perspective casts doubt on putting one's trust in possessions (which are the result of trade) and so relativises the importance of trade for a life full of meaning and hope. Thus the Epistle of James warns: "Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money." Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring." (James 4, 13f.). In the *individualised* view of the virtues catalogued in the NT, the "sanctification of life" does not only extend to relations with the family, with husband or wife, but also to professional ethics, for instance "that no one wrong or exploit a brother or sister" (I. Thess. 4, 6).

In Revelations, there is a drastic description of the merchants' despair and the futility of the magnificent trade ships as a result of the decline of Babylon (Rev. 18, 9-19).

Summarising observations

1. Trade, both as domestic and long-distance (international) trade is regarded as natural and affirmed as a matter-of-course reality in the Bible. Long-distance trade was an important motor for growth/ prosperity even in the times of the ancient Orient.

2. Then again, the texts reveal the transitoriness of trade relations – flourishing world trade centres have always come and gone – and the various dangers arising from their abuse. The prophets reveal the tightrope walk of trade: it is judged as favourable, but at the same time criticised if it is associated with expectation of salvation. The prophet revealed the limits of global trade

3. In Biblical terms, trade is fair if

- it is not abused for purposes of power politics (Ezek. 28.,6),

- it does not oppress and exploit anyone (Ezek. 28.16). Especially women are victims of this exploitation,

- it deals in goods, but not in people, i.e. slaves (Joel 3.6; Amos 1.9),

- grants producers a fair wage (Isaiah 23.3),

- admits of redistribution, and of fair and widespread profit participation (Isaiah 23.18).

4. The NT texts place trade, like any other activity in life, into the perspective of the kingdom of God and His justice. This is also the yardstick against which trade must be measured.

5. Unjust and unfair trade kills lives. Just and fair trade enhances life. So direct and simple – despite all the detailed differentiation – is Biblical trade ethics.

Further reflection in: Christoph Stückelberger: Global Trade Ethics, WCC, Geneva 2002, 260pp.