

Virtues and Economics

Luigino Bruni

The Economy of Salvation

Ethical and Anthropological
Foundations of Market Relations
in the First Two Books of the Bible

Edited by Peter Róna



Springer

Virtues and Economics

Volume 4

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The book has been translated from the Italian by Eszter Katò.

Introduction: A Journey to the End of the Night

Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market-place, and cried incessantly: "I am looking for God! I am looking for God!" As many of those who did not believe in God were standing together there, he excited considerable laughter. (F. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*).

Abstract Why then the Bible and Economics? To say Europe and the West is to say Judeo-Christian humanism in its various forms, contaminations, cross-fertilizations, diseases, and reactions but especially in its copious and extraordinary fruits of civilization. This humanism has its own articulate foundational codes. One of these, the deepest and most fruitful one, is the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, which provides us with the words with which to speak of politics and love, death and economics, and hope and doom for millennia. In an era in which our "words are tired" and do not speak anymore because they are "worn out" and reduced to a "breath of wind," it is necessary to start the search of words bigger than our age. The words of the Bible have nurtured and inspired our civilization. They were revived and reinterpreted by many generations, they have filled up our most beautiful works of art and the dreams of children and adults, and they made us hope during the many painful times of exile and slavery that we have gone through and are going through still.

There are historical passages in which people realize that old things have passed away, the previous world is about to end, and there is a yearning desire for something new. Our time is one of these times (that the old Greek would have called *kairoi*). An essential resource in these ages of cultural crisis is the "narrative patrimony," a necessary asset needed for imagining and then writing the requisite new stories. Human beings like many things, but overall we like the amazing stories, to tell and to listen to. Without amazing stories the economy and business also suffer, because entrepreneurship and consumption are essentially storytelling, narratives about firms, markets, and commodities. "I had something to tell, but I was not good at writing, so I made a company," said to me an entrepreneur friend. This book is written in the belief that the Bible can offer some of the new generative words for

imagining, telling, writing, and incarnating new economic life and new collective social and political actions and narratives.

In the last two decades, thanks mainly to the work of the philosopher Giorgio Agamben (1998, 2005, 2011), there is a new interest in the theological roots of modern economics.¹ *Economic theology* is today something similar to Carl Schmitt's *Political Theology* (1922/2005), i.e., the attempt to find and show the theological origin of some of the fundamental concepts of Economics, i.e., spontaneous order, debt, and the original meaning of the Greek word for economy (*oikonomia*). This book goes in the same direction, by searching in the Bible the roots of other keywords related to the Economy and Economics, such as market, salary, contract, pact, reciprocity, gratuitousness, and meritocracy. It is an essay of *archeology* of Economics and, more generally, social sciences, in the sense specified by Agamben, namely, the search for the *archè* (principle) of our categories. Agamben and the other scholars of the Economic Theology research project find the economic *archè* in the theology of the so-called fathers of the church (Tertullian, Cyrillus of Alexandria, Origen, Irenaeus of Lyon, etc.), those who made the first theological-philosophical mediation of the event of Christ. My goal is less ambitious, surely different, since these roots of economic concepts are searched directly in the Bible, neither in the Hebrew nor in the Christian theology. The book is an exercise of *narrative* Biblical Economics, where the arguments are not justified nor proved on the basis of academic footnotes and references. I have tried to keep the text plain and easy, although in the bibliography the reader can find the books and papers for further reading. I followed what the economist Alfred Marshall suggested to his fellow economists in relation to mathematics, a suggestion that I have applied to biblical studies: use the mathematics (i.e., Biblical studies) for the scientific rigor of the reasoning, but don't put them in the text, in order to make possible the reading even for the "laypeople" (not familiar with mathematics, theology, or Biblical studies).

Why then the Bible and Economics? To say Europe and the West is to say Judeo-Christian humanism in its various forms, contaminations, cross-fertilizations, diseases, and reactions but especially in its copious and extraordinary fruits of civilization. This humanism has its own articulate foundational codes. One of these, the deepest and most fruitful one, is the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, which provides us with the words with which to speak of politics and love, death and economics, and hope and doom for millennia. In an era in which our "words are tired" (Ecclesiastes) and do not speak anymore because they are "worn out" and reduced to a "breath of wind" (Ecclesiastes), it is necessary to start the search of words bigger than our age. The words of the Bible have nurtured and inspired our civilization. They were revived and reinterpreted by many generations, they have filled up our most beautiful works of art and the dreams of children and adults, and they made us hope during the many painful times of exile and slavery that we have gone through

¹ See also Foucault (1999), Leshem (2013, 2014, 2015), Nelson (2004, 2017), Dean (2012), Toscano (2014), Bruni (2008, 2012a, b), Bruni et al. (2014), Bruni and Porta (2015), Bruni and Smerilli (2015), Bruni and Zamagni (2007, 2014, 2016), Bruni and Milbank (2018), Bruni et al. (2016).

and are going through still. There are no stories of liberation that could be greater than those of the Exodus, no wounds more fertile than those of Jacob, no blessing more desperate than that of Isaac, no laugh more serious than that of Sarah, no contract more unjust than that of Esau, no obedience more blessed than that of Noah, no sin more cowardly than that of David against Uriah the Hittite, no misfortune more radical than that of Job, no crying more fraternal than that of Joseph, no paradox larger than that of Abraham on Mount Moriah, no cry more piercing than that of the cross, and no disobedience fonder of life than that of the midwives of Egypt. There are many reasons that make these narratives “greater.” One is their radical ambivalence, which, if accepted and understood, makes it possible to avoid the dichotomies that are often the first root of every ideology. These stories tell us, for example, that fraternity/sorority always borders on fratricide and that these are the two paths that form a fork in the many crossroads of the stories of individuals and peoples. All the great stories are above all a gift of words that without them, we do not have words donated to us to think, feel, speak, pray, and love. When these great stories and words are missing, we tend to borrow the words from gossip and TV fiction, and with these bricks we can only build a small house.

The Bible has always inspired a lot of literature, a great deal of art, and sometimes law, sociology, or politics, too. Modern economics, however, has never let itself be inspired by the Book of Books. One reason for this absence is the choice Economics made at the end of the nineteenth century to abandon words for numbers. A science with no room left for words cannot understand and dialogue with the Bible that is all about Word.

Along the history of both economics and its practitioners, there have been very few attempts of dialogue with the Bible, and in general with religion. One of the few, Henry Wicksteed (1910), a leading neoclassical English economists, tried to combine the Biblical tradition with economic tradition.

Later, the American Jacob Viner wrote *The Role of Providence in the Social Order* (1970), and in many other economists we find references to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, to the good Samaritan (Buchanan, Sen), to Abraham’s sacrifice, to the book of Job, and to the many parables and episodes of the gospel. Most recently, books such as *Biblical Games* (Brams 2003) or *The Economy of Good and Evil* (Sedlacek 2011) have tried to deal directly with the Bible, and not just with religion or theology. However, there is still a huge continent of possibilities to explore.

The Italian economist, Emanuele Sella, wrote a book in the 1930s trying to build a “Trinitarian economics” (*La dottrina dei tre principi*). He wrote something that is still valid, for both theology and biblical studies: “Economics, as a possible Trinitarian system, is not there (neither among catholic economists!), because the theological culture of economists is nothing, and the economic culture of theologians is poor” (1930, p. 113).

The Economy and Economics had been “under the guidance” of the sacred texts (i.e., on credit, interest money) for many centuries, but as soon as the discipline reached adulthood in the Modern Age, it sought and wanted its freedom. Today, a few centuries later, it is possible, and I believe necessary, to start a new lay dialogue.

The idea inspiring this book is that the Bible has many words to offer to our economic life and ideas. It can tell us things it has not said yet, because for too long no one has asked it to speak to us. But if it is true that reading the Bible can enrich the economy, it is equally true that new “economic” questions can make those texts say things that they have not yet said.

Finally, human history has always been a dialogue composed of new questions and new answers; and if on the one hand the Word has pushed forward humanity, on the other hand, and on a different level, the history of mankind has also allowed us to understand ever-new meanings of the scriptures (this is where the enormous dignity of history lies). If the Bible starts to speak again in the streets, in business, and in the markets, all these human-inhabited places will have great benefit from it; but the biblical text will also be enriched, and it will offer new answers that it has not yet given because the questions have not been asked. Without the nourishing environment of the squares and markets, without the *humus* of everyday life and the fatigue of work, the Bible does not become the tree of life. The St. Matthew Passion has become more splendid after Bach, Jacob is better after Rembrandt, and Joseph is more beautiful after Thomas Mann. If it were not so, history would be an unnecessary background of a theater piece, of a script that is already completely written, and those early Biblical books would no longer be alive.

With this background and perspective, this book contains my reflections on the first two books of the Bible. The Part I of the book is the systematic comment (chapter by chapter) of the book of the Genesis, and Part II is the comment of the Book of Exodus. The *Genesis* is the “first” book of the Bible, for many reasons. It is the *foundation* of the entire Bible, because it contains the great narratives of creation, Cain and Abel, Noah, and later Abraham and the Covenant, and the sagas of patriarchs of Israel, up to the marvelous cycle of Joseph in Egypt.

The book of *Exodus* is about empires and liberation. The Exodus starts in Egypt, where the Genesis ends, and it can also be seen as a sort of continuation of that story, around the fundamental figure of Moses and his journey toward the Promised Land. There have always been empires, and they still exist. But today we are getting used to them – which makes it increasingly difficult to recognize them. And since we do not recognize them, we do not call them by that name either, we do not feel oppressed by them, and we do not start any process of liberation. There remains only the “sovereignty” of consumers, who in turn are more and more unhappy and lonely sitting on their couches. The reading of the Book of Exodus is a great spiritual and ethical exercise, perhaps the greatest of all, for those who want to become aware of the “pharaohs” that oppress us, to feel the desire for freedom inside themselves again, to hear the cry of the oppressed poor, and to try to liberate at least some of them.

I will try to make these old and still fertile Biblical narratives say some contemporary economic and civil words by asking questions to them; but the most interesting questions will be those that these texts will pose to us. The greater part of the challenge will be not to try to update those ancient pages but to make ourselves their contemporaries. And we will read them along with thousands of years of history, in the company of many, believers and non-believers, who have entered into dialogue with the Bible and, by enriching it, have enriched the world.

A final note.

In the following pages, there are some recurring keywords that have been introduced, discussed, and developed in those years of my personal and collective research on *Civil Economy*. The main frequent and relevant ones are *reciprocity* (Bruni 2008; Bruni and Tufano 2017; Bruni and Zamagni 2007, 2016), *gratuitousness* (Bruni and Smerilli 2015), *pacts* (vs. contracts: Bruni 2012a, b), and *awards* (vs. incentives: Bruni et al. 2018). As discussed in the last 15 years of research, the way I use these words is in general different from their commonsense meaning. Reciprocity requires a certain degree of gratuitousness and is not fully instrumental and extrinsic; gratuitousness is not the gratis (for free) but has to do with intrinsic motivation; the presence of gratuitousness makes pacts (or covenants) different from contracts; awards are the acknowledgment of intrinsic motivated actions, whereas incentives are contracts. To keep light and enjoyable the reading, these keywords will not be analytically discussed in this book, where instead these words are taken as primitive; at the same time, at the end of the reading, the different bits will converge toward a puzzle, where it would be possible to see a first grammar of a biblical economy.

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Part I

Genesis

Chapter 1

Saving Glances in Times of Exile



I took its ancient words and my old questions and compared them with the vicissitudes of history, culture and customs. In short, I used my Judeo-Christian faith as a key, and I was confirmed in the belief that in our days it is the only possible key to use.

(Sergio Quinzio, *A comment to the Bible*).

Abstract In the beginning, there is no Cain. There's something 'good and beautiful' instead, that, on the sixth day, with Adam became 'very good and beautiful'. It is the blessing that hovers over the created world. The beginning of the earth, the living beings and humans is goodness and beauty, which tells us what is the deepest and truest vocation of the earth, the living. It also tells us that the earth is alive because it is located within a relationship of love and mutuality. For the mountains, rocks and rivers are also living things, otherwise those other beings we call the living would be surrounded by death, and the little life that would be left would be just too sad. The first chapter of Genesis is a sublime hymn to life and creation, with Adam, the human being as its climax. And all these creatures are good, very good, beautiful and blessed because they were called to life by an overflow of love.

In the beginning, there is no Cain. There's something '*good and beautiful*' instead, that, on the sixth day, with Adam became '*very good and beautiful*' (cf.: Genesis 1:31). It is the blessing that hovers over the created world. The *bereshit*, the beginning of the earth, the living beings and humans is goodness and beauty, which tells us what is the deepest and truest vocation of the earth, the *living*.

It also tells us that the earth is alive because it is located within a relationship of love and mutuality. For the mountains, rocks and rivers are also living things, otherwise those other beings we call the living would be surrounded by death, and the little life that would be left would be just too sad (as it probably appears to the one who does not know how to see this life). The first chapter of Genesis is a sublime

hymn to life and creation, with Adam, the human being as its climax. And all these creatures are good, very good, beautiful and blessed because they were called to life by an overflow of love.

Yet, human history of that time (Fourth–fifth century BC), and of our own, was and is still the scene of fights, murders and death. The first aspect of greatness in this text that I find amazing is its ability not to dedicate the first words to the everyday human relations that the authors of sacred texts saw happening before their own eyes. Instead they had the strength and inspiration to dedicate the first words to harmony, goodness and beauty, to the blessings of the creatures and to the most beautiful and best of all creatures: Adam. We do not find this anthropological (and ontological) positivism in the creation stories from the Near East or India that are contemporaries or more ancient than Genesis. In these, in fact, the world is born out of violence, from war between the gods, by decadence and degeneration. However, the first word on man in biblical humanism is goodness- and-beauty (*tov*). Evil can be tremendous and crazy, but the good is deeper and stronger than any large and devastating evil.

Many of these early passages of Genesis were written during the Babylonian exile, or when its memory was still very much alive and painful. Exiles do not end unless there is faith and hope that the good is greater and deeper than the ills of the present.

In that good and beautiful setting Cain and Lamech, Joseph's brothers who sold him, Sodoma's inhabitants, the golden calf and the Benjamites of Gibeon were all already there. But we were there, too, with the concentration camps, the foibe killings, the gulag and the massacres of innocent people, merchants of the poor and gambling, wars of religion, 9/11 and the young people killed in Kiev, and all the evils and mass killings we are committing now, and, in all likelihood, will commit tomorrow, too. But first there was this very beautiful and very good thing, made "*a little lower than the angels*" (Psalm 8): there was a blessing that was given for all times and that cannot be cancelled by all our sins. This very beautiful and very good thing may get ill and it may degenerate, but no illness of soul and body is strong enough to wipe out this beauty and cancel this primordial goodness. It takes a lot of pain and a lot of agape to continue to believe in this *bereshit*, but this tenacious and stubborn faith is the only way to save us from those diseases and from succumbing to cynicism and nihilism that are always lurking in our civilization, especially in times of crisis and exile.

Life does not die, we cannot be put out inside until – despite having to watch the story from the perspective of Cain and his sons – we do not forget that *before* Cain there is Adam. And if he is there first, he may be the last man as well, because the darkness of the *eighth day* fails to dim the auroral light of the sixth – this is the main message and the greatest act of love that comes from Genesis and the Alliance. The hope that is not in vain lies in never letting the first chapter of Genesis be just a self-consolatory myth, a paradise lost forever, theological smoke in the eyes of the people, a bed-time story for children or the first fiction.

To believe in this first word about the world and man, however, means not to believe the legions of cynics, the many friends of Job who want to convince us that the first and last word about humans is that of Cain. It is on this radical anthropological pessimism that we have built social contracts and Leviathans, criminal law and the courts, tax designs and tax collection, the banks, the investment fund and euthanasia for children.

However, an economy that proceeded on the primacy of Adam over Cain and Lamech would take the ethics of virtues as its foundation, one that has its real roots in the supremacy of good over evil, and that would not let itself be colonized by the subspecies of utilitarianism that are commanding it right now. And then it would see workers like people capable of good and beautiful things first, and it would design organizations where gifts and beauty could grow and not just cynicism and opportunism produced by visions and theories that do nothing but multiply the children of Cain. Then we would use more awards (the motivational tools of Adam) and less incentives (born from the Cain-like anthropology). The real man is a mix between Cain and Adam, but the Bible's humanism tells us that Adam is the first. If the first and last word about us was that of Cain, no forgiveness and no restart would be real.

Those who take that first word on the human seriously, or receive it as a gift will have their soul's eyes changed. They will be able to see that the world is full of beautiful and good things. They can marvel at sunsets, stars and snow-capped mountains but they also see very good and very beautiful things when they look at their colleagues, neighbours, old people dying, the terminally ill, the many people warped by poverty or by too much wealth, the grandmother who has returned to be a little girl playing with dolls again, John who is drunk and smelly in the metro, Lucia who has not woken up from a coma, Cain who continues to shock us. No Amazon rainforest, no Alpine mountain peak can ever reach the beauty and goodness of Mary, the homeless woman at Termini Station in Rome. Just a few of these 'glances' may be enough for us make us rise every morning, to lift us from every crisis. We are still alive because these glances have been and continue to be taken. They were taken by eyes that may have looked at us unnoticed, starting with the first glimpse of the woman who greeted us when we came to this world. The charismas are above all the gift of these different glances at the world, that by looking at us and saying our name turn us into what we already are. By being there they saved Adam from the murderous hand of Cain.

These Maieutic looks have been and are still there in firms and markets. I have come across them many times: in a contractor who placed his confidence again in a worker after a serious betrayal, in a worker who forgave a colleague after a deception, or in a hug between partners after years of deep and reciprocal hurt. And they are there even in times of exile and crisis when these acts of imprudence cost much. Glances that are agapically imprudent, never naive, always true and saving, capable of miracles when crossing other glances of the same type of eyes. "*And he saw that it was very good and very beautiful*".

Chapter 2

Counterparts – From the Very Beginning



Death will come and will have your eyes.

(Cesare Pavese).

Abstract From the very beginning, Adam is placed in the garden of Eden, he takes care of it and cultivates it. He works. Two of the trees have a name: the tree of life' and 'the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Adam is allowed to eat the fruits of the tree of life and the other trees but not those of the second tree. And at this point Elohim says: It is not good for Adam to be alone. And Elohim made for Adam his counterpart. For the first time, in a creation that is still all good and beautiful, we find that there is something that is "not good", namely, loneliness, a relational shortcoming. This is where one of the most striking and richest passages of Genesis starts. There is an assembly of animals and birds of the sky in front of Adam. Adam gives them their name, that is, he enters into a relationship with them, gets to know them and discovers their nature and mystery; but at the end of this procession of the non-human creation Adam is not satisfied because he has not yet found any creature that could stand by his side as his counterpart.

"It is not good for Adam to be alone." The creation is completed when that 'something very beautiful and very good' – Adam – is revealed as a plural reality, and becomes a person. The rhythm of the second chapter of Genesis is fascinating and amazingly rich as it leads from Adam (the human being) to man and woman.

From the very beginning, Adam is placed in the garden of Eden, he takes care of it and cultivates it: that is, he works. Two of the trees have a name: '*the tree of life*' and '*the tree of the knowledge of good and evil*'.

Adam is allowed to eat the fruits of the tree of life and the other trees but not those of the second tree. And at this point *Elohim* says: "*It is not good for Adam to be alone.*" And so: "I will make for him a helper as his counterpart." (2:18). For the first time, in a creation that is still all good and beautiful, we find that there is something that is "*not good*", namely, loneliness, a relational shortcoming. This is where