

*Jesus the Economist: Envisioning God's Economy of  
Solidarity and Equality to Global Resilience*

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**Abstract**

Throughout the earthly life of Jesus, he spoke regularly about wealth, possession, ownership, poverty, and even the economy's taxes. As a result, multiple interpretations of Jesus as an economist have emerged: some believe He was a socialist, while others believe He was a capitalist. This paper is a case study of the historical Jesus that focuses on understanding Jesus as an economist by envisioning God's economy, not by placing Him into a single economic system of being a capitalist or socialist, specifically on how Jesus as an economist contributed significantly to global recovery and resilience in present time. To put it into context, God's economy is seeing the entire world as God's household; all creation of God belongs to God's household. In God's economy, Jesus was concerned about solidarity and equality, not with the profit of a single individual or group, but with the well-being of all, as recounted in the scriptures. Regardless of the economic system we follow, this pandemic has presented various issues. These issues have an impact on the economy of the country and lead to increasingly dangerous crises, injustices, and inequities among the population. As a result, every nation is attempting to recover economically, and every country hopes for global recovery and resilience. Reconnecting to Jesus' teachings and examples of solidarity and equality is a focal point to global resilience.

Keywords: Economy, Resilience, Solidarity, Equality, Household, Collectivism, Jesus

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## **Introduction**

There are various images or titles that are attributed to Jesus, such as the *Messiah* (Mk 8:29), Son of God (Jn 20:31), Son of Man (Lk 19:10), Word or *logos* (Jn 1:1), Lord (Lk 2:11) Rabbi (Jn 9:2). These are some of the titles or images attributed to Him that can be found clearly in the scripture. One image of Jesus that may not be directly stated in the scripture but usually comes out when understanding the historical Jesus is – the economist. Though Jesus did not engage in any formal studies in economics nor clearly and directly preach any technical terms about the economic system. He frequently talked about wealth, possession, ownership, poverty, and even taxes which constitute the economy, during His earthly life. With this, what could be the relevance of the historical Jesus as an economist in our modern time?

## **Method of Theology**

This paper uses a theological method of correlation formulated by Edward Schillebeeckx, regarded as one of the twentieth century's most prominent Catholic theologians. This correlation is between "two sources" of theology, which he labels the two poles of theology: the experiences of the tradition and present-day experiences" (Fiorenza, 2011, p.43). In the first part, this paper conducts historical research on Jesus as an economist in envisioning God's economy of solidarity and equality, which constitutes the first pole. Then, correlate it by analyzing the recent experiences (second pole), particularly on the impact caused by the pandemic. In our current situation, pandemics have wreaked havoc on the planet, causing a slew of problems economically, socially, and even spiritually. These issues have an impact on the economy of every nation and lead to crises, inequalities, and injustices.

## **First Pole: Historical Jesus**

This first source of theology depicts the tradition of the Christian experience. This is an encounter of the people with the historical Jesus, which leads people to their understanding of Jesus.

## **Jewish Economy During the Time of Jesus**

The socio-economic context of where Jesus came from is essential in understanding the historical Jesus. Capper (2011) mentioned that "Jesus lived in a society of massive wealth and differentiation between the political elite and the mass of ordinary people" (p.107). He further described the agrarian society in two classes:

Between a narrow governing class or wealth elite, numbering less than one or two percent of the population, "the few" [hoi ologoi], "the notables," "the rich," "the powerful" [hoi dynatoi], and the large mass of small tenant farmers, laborers, and rural artisans, "the many" [hoi polloi], "the people," "the poor," the "weak" (Capper, 2011, p.108).

We can see the vast gap in numbers between the elite and the poor, an elite group comprising less than one or two of the total population, and a large group of people is poor. With such a gap in their social structure, the elite families wield power in societal governance. According to Hakkinen (2016), "the wealth and status of the elite families ensured their influence in politics so that they were able to control both local and regional governance and also profit from taxation" (p.2). In addition, Draper (2003) stated that "Jesus came from Nazareth, a

village wherein the sole source of income was subsistence farming by peasant landholders.” He also explained the life of a peasant in the time of Jesus:

The peasant may or may not own his own land, but it is a feature of peasant life that they are required to pay dues of up to half their crop to a landlord, who has established jurisdiction over them. This is called their *rent requirement* and epitomizes the *asymmetrical power relation* between peasant producers and their controllers. It means that the peasant never prospers beyond a certain point because increased production results in increased in rent (Draper, 2003, 84).

This could be the reason why a considerable number of the population comprises poor people. For, even if they work hard and produce more, the demand from the elite group will also increase. It would be challenging for poor people to overcome poverty because of some injustices and inequality. Hakkinen (2016) also cited M.I. Finley that “inequality was typical for all the societies in the ancient world...not between town and country, not between classes, but simply between rich and poor” (p.1). Therefore, to see the socio and economic context of a historical Jesus, we realize that Jesus came from a community where inequality, injustices, and poverty were apparent.

Jesus is typically associated with marginalized or people in lower classes, for he came and lived in a not well-off family. Jesus was born in a manger (Luke 2:7), and his father worked as a carpenter (Mt.13:55), a work that he eventually embraced. According to Edayadiyil (2009), “the sacrifice that Jesus’ parents offered in the temple (Lk 2:24) amply illustrates that his family was poor” (p.4). He further stated that “Jesus’ whole life was identified with the poor, and he in every sense is one of the typical poor (anawim) of the Old Testament” (Edayadiyil, 2021, p.4). But Jesus being with the marginalized does not mean that He never mingled with the elite group of people. He also interacted with the religious elite, such as scribes, Sadducees, Pharisees, members of the Sanhedrin, including Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea (Jn 3:1-21; 19:38) (Jones, 2016). This interaction of Jesus with the poor and wealthy people would give us a picture of His economic viewpoint. Bess (2012) claimed that “Jesus made his reputation as a Jewish economist, one with very strong opinions about wealth and property, about the relationship between the rich and the poor.”

Furthermore, if we examine the scriptures thoroughly throughout his earthly life, we can see that economy was a component of His earthly life and ministry. Jesus talked about wealth and possession in the story of the rich young man (Mt 19:16-30). He taught parables about agriculture and land, such as the parable of the sower (Mt 13:1-9), the parable of the mustard seed (Mk 4:30-32), and the parable of the tenants (Mt 21:33-46). He also asked his followers to invest in treasures in heaven (Lk 12:32-33, Luke 14:13-14). Given that the central theme of his mission was the kingdom of God, his teachings also touched on the economy. Yet, there are various interpretations of Jesus as an economist; some say He was a socialist, and others perceive Him as a capitalist. “Socialists finesse Scripture to justify redistributing wealth to “the least of these” (Matthew 25:40), while capitalists overplay the Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30)” (Flax, 2022).

### **Jesus as Socialist**

Socialism in the Christian context is described as “simply a natural consequence or outworking of Christianity; the Bible teaches that God is the Father, and socialism is the system whereby the people of the world or a particular society can live as brothers and sisters” (Williams, 2016). Everyone belongs to one family, having one Father in heaven –

God. It signifies that the theme of socialism can be seen - humanity encompasses one huge family, despite individuality and distinctions. One scriptural basis could attest to that can be found in the Gospel of Matthew "as for you, do not be called Rabbi, you have one teacher, and you are all brothers, call no one on earth your father; you have but one Father in heaven" (Mt.23:8-9). Williams (2016) also claimed a socialist interpretation on verses of Beatitudes:

Verses such as "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 5:3) and "Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth" (Mt. 5:5) were given socialist interpretations: the Kingdom of Heaven belonged to the poor rather than the rich; the earth would be inherited by the meek rather than being controlled by the capitalist and landlord class (p.30).

This narrative conveys a message of hope to the poor and oppressed, implying that Christ's teachings include the concept of brotherhood, solidarity, equality, and socialism. Another reference to Jesus' socialism is the parable of the rich young man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19-31). For Williams, this parable serves as a warning to people in positions of authority or influence who do not use their varied powers in a socialist manner. But then, the common reference to Jesus as a socialist can be seen in his response to the rich young man seeking eternal life "go sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven" (Mt.19:21). These are some examples in the life and teachings of Jesus denouncing wealth and warning the rich people about how they treat their wealth. Jesus wants to distribute the wealth to those less fortunate. Jesus' special attention to the poor and marginalized people signifies equality, solidarity, and fairness for everyone.

### **Jesus and the Capitalism**

Capitalism is defined as "the utilization of goods and service as a means of profit-making" (Annot and Martindale, 2021). They discuss competition as one of the tenets of Christianity concerning capitalism:

Since the fall, man has lived in an economic environment of scarcity (Gen 3:17-19). All products and services are scarce; there is more demand than supply for everything...In capitalism, the demands of many buyers and the supply of many producers determine who gets what via competition – the suppliers compete for customers, and customers compete for products with their money. As we Christians, we must be good stewards of our resources (Proverbs 31:10-31, Mt 25:14-30, and Lk 16:1-13). That means we must do the best we can with what we are given. Doing the best we can in an environment of scarcity means we sometimes do better than others and win, and sometimes we do worse and lose (Annot and Martindale, 2021, pp. 9-10).

There we can see the principle of competition in the context of stewardship of Christianity. More than winning, God wants us to do our best in cultivating and developing the resources. The parable of talents (Mt 25:14-30) taught by Jesus can be seen in the framework of stewardship. The master in the story was pleased for the servants to earn him the most profit, except for the one who buried the talent and did not gain anything. The master, like the capitalist, is more pleased with servants who produce more than the servant who gains nothing. This story supports the argument that capitalism has a place in Jesus Christ's teachings.

## **Jesus Envisioning God's Economy**

The historical Jesus did not openly stimulate nor encourage a specific economic system for people. Thus, understanding Jesus as an economist must be seen on a broader scope and not put him in a single economic system of being a capitalist or socialist. He talked so much about economics in his earthly ministry, especially how He envisioned God's economy (Smith, 2012). The word "economy" can be traced back to the Greek word *oikonomia*, which is composed of two words: *oikos*, which is translated as "household," and *nemein*, which is translated as "management and dispensation" (Leshem, 2016). To put it into context, we can see the entire world as God's household; all creation of God belongs to God's household. Therefore, Jesus as an economist is about Jesus managing God's household by promoting solidarity and equality for all.

## **Second Pole: Contemporary Experiences**

Two contrasting elements characterize the second pole in Schillebeeckx's correlation: its hopeful orientation to the future and its confrontation with an excess of suffering and senseless injustice, both of which were caused by the utilitarian individualism of Western Modernity (Fiorenza, 2011). This goes with the increasing wealth and power with instrumentalizing the human person and society at the expense of the environment and human well-being (Boeve, 2004). In today's context, the COVID 19 outbreak and the social and moral challenges it spawned constitute the second pole.

## **COVID-19 Outbreak (Contemporary Situation)**

Coronavirus disease (COVID 19) has wreaked havoc on people's lives worldwide. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID 19 outbreak a global pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020). Globally, as of January 13, 2022, there have been 315,345,967 confirmed cases of COVID-19, including 5,510,174 deaths, reported to WHO (WHO Coronavirus Dashboard, 2022). This pandemic has brought a slew of problems, including social and economic catastrophes and widespread human suffering and death. According to the World Bank Group, "this is the largest crisis response of any such period in the Bank Group's history and represents an increase of more than 60% over the 15-month period prior to the pandemic" (The World Bank, 2021). Likewise, there will be 205 million unemployed individuals in the labor sector in 2022, up from 187 million in 2019 (United Nations Development Programme, n.d.). As to the United Nations' response to COVID 19, "it is more than a health crisis; it is an economic crisis, a humanitarian crisis, a security crisis, and a human right crisis" (United Nations, n.d.). COVID 19 has disproportionately impacted specific individuals and groups—as characterized by factors such as race, class, gender, disability, age, displacement and homelessness, and migration status, among others—reflecting longstanding disparities and inequalities not only in health and health care but also in society (McNeely and Schintler, 2020). As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, it has highlighted global social inequalities and injustices, such as gender inequality, circumstances where the poor people get poorer and ethnic inequalities.

## **Gender Inequality**

The COVID-19 virus does not discriminate between males and females infected. However, the pandemic is highlighting inequalities, including gender disparities. Antonio Guterres, the ninth Secretary-General of the United Nations, described women's inequality:

Women are disproportionately represented in poorly paid jobs without benefits, as domestic workers, casual labourers, street vendors, and in small-scale services like hairdressing. The International Labour Organization estimates that nearly 200 million jobs will be lost in the next three months alone – many of them in exactly these sectors. And just as they are losing their paid employment, many women face a huge increase in care work due to school closures, overwhelmed health systems, and the increased needs of older people. Many men, too, are facing job losses and conflicting demands. But even at the best of times, women do three times as much domestic work as men. That means they are more likely to be called on to look after children if businesses open while schools remain closed, delaying their return to the paid labour force (Guterres, 2020 para 6-9).

While the crisis has had a detrimental impact on most people's lives and careers, women's jobs and livelihoods are more vulnerable to the COVID-19 pandemic (Azcue et al., 2020). This indicates that the pandemic's major concern is not just every country's health system but also its commitment to equality.

### **Poor get poorer, and the rich get richer**

According to the International Labour Organization, around 600 million people work in the hardest-hit industries, such as hospitality and retail; these sectors are represented mainly by women, ethnic minorities, migrants, the low-skilled, and the young; they also tend to pay poorly (Romei, 2020). She also cited Sebastian Konigs, a labor economist at the OECD, in her article "more vulnerable labour market groups – notably the low-skilled and workers in non-standard jobs – have been most strongly affected by job and earnings losses so far which could further increase existing wealth inequalities" (Romei, 2020). As a result of the pandemic's influence on the labor group, the poor become poorer. On the other hand, the rich get richer because of their opportunities in this kind of situation. Romei presented that:

The 10 richest billionaires in the world increased their wealth by \$319bn in 2020, with technology billionaires accounting for the vast majority of the gain, according to research by Bloomberg. According to Chuck Collins of the Institute for Policy Studies, billionaires' wealth "is surging," and "many of them are profiting from our increasing dependence on cloud-based technologies, online retail, drug research, telemedicine, videoconferencing — services that have become essential services during the pandemic (Romei, 2020).

### **Ethnic Inequalities**

Volkan Bozkir, the President of the 75<sup>th</sup> session of the UN General Assembly, said that "today, the COVID 19 pandemic has laid bare the existing vulnerabilities facing the most marginalized and disadvantaged groups" (United Nations Human Rights, 2021, para 1). As COVID 19 progresses, discrimination and inequalities have grown. According to Ian Goldin and Robert Muggah, "the pandemic is deepening geographic inequality with people living in poor places being more vulnerable to the health and economic impacts of the pandemic" (Goldin and Muggah, 2020). This means that COVID 19 has a greater impact on poorer areas due to fragile health and economic situations. Both Golden and Muggah used the example of a downturn in the United States:

Within a month of the pandemic hitting the US, 22% of small businesses went under. While 17% of white-owned businesses failed, 41% of black-owned businesses collapsed. One reason for this disparity is due to the way pandemic hotspots

concentrated in poorer neighbourhoods. Black-owned businesses also generally had weaker underlying finances, fewer reserves, and much weaker contacts with banks and financial institutions empowered by the government to administer emergency grants (Goldin and Muggah, 2020, Ethnic inequalities on the rise section, para 1).

Furthermore, they claimed that wealth inequalities reflect inequalities on other dimensions, such as income, where black workers earn 9% less and Bangladeshi workers earn 20% less than white workers in Britain, and people from racial, religious, and ethnic minorities have been threatened with physical violence, hate speech, and conspiracy theories accusing them of spreading the virus during the pandemic (Goldin and Muggah, 2020).

### **Correlation of the Two Poles**

The method of correlation emphasizes a critical confrontation between tradition and the modern situation. In this sense, new contextual experiences help to cast a fresh look at the tradition on the one hand, and this tradition, as an ever-renewing interpretation of experiences, produces perspectives that give a Christian dimension to this modern context on the other (Boeve, 2004). Both sources (poles) have something to offer in deepening one's faith. After recognizing Jesus' concern for solidarity and equality in God's economy, the question becomes, "How can this be of help in responding to the challenges and crises brought to us by the pandemic?" or how can Jesus' teachings and examples of solidarity and equality be used to build global resilience?

### **Gender Equality**

One of the facets of God's economy that needs to consider is gender equality, particularly the participation of women in God's household. Thus, it is necessary to look back on how Jesus related to women. Jesus, in the light of the Jewish environment, appears to be a unique and sometimes radical reformer of the views of women and the roles they played in His people's culture (Witherington III, 1998). He described the role of women in Judaism and compared it to the Christian community:

While women were able neither to make up the quorum necessary to found a synagogue nor to receive the Jewish covenant sign, these limitations did not exist in the Christian community. The necessary and sufficient explanation of why Christianity differed from its religious mother, Judaism, in these matters is that Jesus broke with both biblical and rabbinic traditions that restricted women's roles in religious practices and that He rejected attempts to devalue the worth of a woman or her word of witness. Thus, the community of Jesus, both before and after Easter, granted women *together* with men (not segregated from men as in some pagan cults) an equal right to participate fully in the family of faith (Witherington III, 1998, p.127).

This had a significant influence on the public, increasing the number of followers. Many people, particularly women, were drawn to Jesus due to his reformation of equality. Grenz (1995) stated that:

women found the message of Jesus appealing because it gave them equal status with men and new avenues of religious service. They sensed that the gospel granted women, as well as men, the opportunity to participate fully in the community of God's new people (pp 63-64).

In addition, Kategile asserted that “Jesus’ attitude towards women gives credibility to women and their ministry during his time” (Kategile, 2020, para 9).

In today’s crisis, Antonio Guterres asserts that “gender equality and women’s rights are essential to getting through this pandemic together, to recovering faster and to building a better future for everyone” (United Nations, 2020). According to the research conducted by Azcue et al. (2020), "the faster the policymakers and business leaders act to push for greater gender equality, even as the COVID-19 crisis continues, the bigger the benefits not just for gender equality but also for economic growth" (p.9). Many women have experienced restrictions and inequalities in the past years; let Jesus' teachings and examples be a spark of reformation in dealing with equality. Though Jesus lived where the patriarchal system was evident, He supported equality by stressing the participation of women in the Divine plan through missionary works. He opposed the people's customs and culture by seeking equality, not because of their social status but by being a human person. Therefore, Jesus, as described in the scriptures concerned about fairness and equality in God's economy, not for the profit of a single person or group but rather for the welfare of all.

### **Collectivism**

In his book *The Social World of Jesus and the Gospels*, Bruce Malina described the social structure in Jesus’ time. He mentioned that “for the people of that time and place, the basic, most elementary unit of social analysis was not the individual person considered alone and apart from others as a unique being, but the dyadic person, a person always in relation with and connected to at least one other social unit, usually a group” (Malina, 1996, p.38). It means that a person's identity is formed through their relationships with others. Strauss (2007) stated that “it is sometimes called dyadism, meaning that essential identity comes from being a member of a family, a community, or a nation” (p.230). As a result, if a person's identity is developed through participation in a group, actions should be carried out to benefit the group or community. This social construct suggests that a group’s goals are more important than individual goals. Malina refers to it as *collectivism* in his book; he believes that “the defining attributes of collectivistic cultures are family integrity, solidarity, and keeping the primary ingroup in good health" and that it focuses on the ingroup's views, needs, and goals rather than a single group. (Malina, 1996, p.79). In the time of Jesus, the ingroup consisted of the core group around Jesus or called Jesus' faction. For Malina, what distinguishes a faction from other coalitions is that the faction is personally recruited by a single person for the recruiter’s purpose. Furthermore, he declared that “the virtues extolled by collectivist cultures will be attitudes that look to the benefit of the faction founder and his goals: the gospel of the Kingdom of God” (Malina, 1996, p.89). In other words, people who have expressed an interest in joining the faction have to facilitate and carry out the leader's goals. In the context of collectivism, Jesus being the leader, conveyed his desire for equality and solidarity; hence, the disciples aligned their views and goals with Jesus' mission. Today, everyone is called to realign their views and goals with Jesus' vision of God's economy of solidarity and equality. As the world grapples with the worldwide crisis caused by COVID 19, international solidarity must be employed for global resilience. No race, ethnic group, or specific community must be left behind.

### **Solidarity with the Poor**

A huge gap between the elite and the poor has existed since the time of Jesus and is still a condition that the world faces today. Because of this gap, Jesus, as seen in the gospels,



showed a radical social concern for the poor or the marginalized. "The Gospels present Jesus repeatedly reaching out to those at the bottom of the social pyramid—poor people, women, Samaritans, lepers, children, prostitutes, and tax collectors" (Edayadiyil, 2009, p.8). This ministerial work of Jesus was stated in *Lumen Gentium* "just as Christ carried out the work of redemption in poverty and persecution, so the Church is called to follow the same route that it might communicate the fruits of salvation to men" (LG para 8). This emphasizes Jesus' love for the poor, implying that everyone should love, care for, and assist in alleviating poverty's burden. Likewise, Pope John Paul II speaks about solidarity as "a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say, the good of all and of each individual because we are all really responsible for all" (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* para 38). This means, according to Pfiel (2020), "shares the same source as the preferential option for the poor: God's love and passionate desire for the flourishing of each and every person and for all creation" (p.8). In the present global crisis due to pandemics, the ones that suffer the most are the poor. "First, they have the highest risk of exposure to the virus, and least access to quality healthcare; second, recent estimates show the pandemic could push up to 115 million people into poverty this year – the first increase in decades" (UN News, 2020). In these most trying times, the solidarity with the poor must strengthen. Global recovery and resilience require assistance and care for the world's most vulnerable and impacted individuals; solidarity with the poor is needed. This calling has been engraved in us by our Creator. As Fr. Kammer emphasized, "if we forget the poor, we have forgotten God and our own radical interconnectedness: to God as life-giver and to one another as sisters and brothers" (Kammer, 2009).

## **Conclusion**

The world has been facing COVID 19 for the past two years now; different nations and global organizations have facilitated and implemented various COVID responses to address the problem in terms of healthcare and the economy. However, these problems affect not just every nation's economic and healthcare systems but also every individual and community's social and moral well-being. For Christians, Jesus is the ultimate norm of morality; thus, it's critical to revisit His teachings and examples whenever moral or social problems occur.

Jesus treated women differently from the cultural norm in His time; He saw all individuals, male and female, as equals. He believed that everyone has something to offer in God's economy; thus, He called everyone to participate in the Divine plan. Different women have witnessed the earthly ministry of Jesus and were given the task to share and proclaim the Gospel. The same responsibility must be given to the women of today, an equal representation and the right to participate in decision-making in times of pandemic.

This pandemic has brought global poverty, especially to the most vulnerable in society. Now is the time to revitalize worldwide solidarity and support. In Jesus' time with the collectivistic culture, everyone is called to align their views and goals with Jesus. This suggests that a person who follows Jesus must prioritize the goal of the community, not on personal interest. If Jesus envisions solidarity and equality in God's economy, that must be the common goal of everyone who embraced Jesus in their life. Thus, the desire for global resilience must be shared by all people, not just a few.

The title of Jesus as an economist based on historical research does not suggest any specific economic system today. It is not a question of whether Jesus promotes socialism or capitalism but rather a question of how Jesus can be a great help in building global resilience

and recovery from the pandemic. As the world struggles with global inequalities and injustices, everyone has to see the world through the eyes of Jesus, who sees God's economy of solidarity and equality as the key to a brighter future.

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