

Reimagining Matthean economic ethics in postcolonial South Africa



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This article investigates the intersection of economic justice and postcolonialism within post-1994 South Africa. Amid growing discourse on economic freedom and justice in both political and religious spheres, this article aims to elucidate the Matthean economic ethical principles and values – for both marginalised and affluent communities in postcolonial South Africa. By adopting a postcolonial framework, the study aims to uncover the underlying power dynamics, socio-economic inequalities, and historical legacies shaping the nation's contemporary economic imbalances. Furthermore, the article explores the role of churches and religious leaders in addressing economic justice issues.

Contribution: This article offers insights into how Matthean economic ethics can be adopted to confront systemic injustices and advocate for the economic empowerment and liberation of marginalised communities in post-1994 South Africa, emphasising the relevance of Matthean economic ethics.

Keywords: Matthean economic ethics; socio-economic inequalities; postcolonial; post-1994; South Africa; Economic justice; political engagement and religious neutrality; moral leadership.

Introduction

Economic justice in both postcolonial and post-1994 South Africa remains a critical issue, deeply rooted in the historical legacies of colonialism and Apartheid. The presumed end of Apartheid in 1994 was supposed to mark the beginning of a new political era and a better life for all; however, socioeconomic disparities have persisted to this day. Despite significant political changes, economic power and resources remain concentrated in the hands of a minority, the white population, while the majority black population continues to face poverty and unemployment (Seekings & Natrass 2005). The economic policies implemented in the post-1994 era, such as the Growth, Employment, and Redistribution (GEAR) and Black Economic Empowerment (BEE)¹ strategies aimed at economic growth and job creation for the black majority, have had mixed results, and are often criticised for not sufficiently addressing the deep-rooted economic inequalities (Marais 2011).

This article aims to investigate the intersection of economic justice in post-1994 South Africa, focusing specifically on marginalised and affluent communities in the Republic of South Africa, anticipating drawing comprehensions from the Matthean economic ethics to create a cohesive and just economic society. The article seeks to firstly, uncover the underlying power dynamics, socioeconomic inequalities, and historical legacies that shape South Africa's contemporary economic landscape. The second goal is to provide insights into how Matthean economic ethics can be utilised as a call to confront systematic injustices and advocate for the economic empowerment and liberation of the marginalised majority of South Africans, and to provide a nuanced understanding of how Matthean economic ethics can inform contemporary socio-economic struggles.

A word on methodological issues

To outline the investigative tool for this article, I will provide a clear theoretical framework that guides the exploration of the subject under discussion. This framework will help to clarify the key

1. Black Economic Empowerment refers to policies aimed at increasing economic participation and ownership among historically marginalised black populations. Originating primarily in South Africa, BEE was instituted to address the socioeconomic inequalities entrenched during Apartheid. Introduced in 2003, the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE) Act 53 expanded the initial BEE framework to include broader socioeconomic goals. It introduced a scorecard system to measure the compliance of companies with B-BBEE criteria across multiple pillars: ownership, management control, skills development, enterprise and supplier development, and socioeconomic development. Black economic empowerment in South Africa has made strides in addressing historical economic disparities but faces criticisms for benefiting a small elite, inconsistent implementation, and potential negative impacts on economic efficiency (Iheduru 2004; Jack 2007; Tangri & Southall 2008). To enhance its effectiveness, recommendations include broadening participation, simplifying compliance, aligning policies with economic growth, and prioritising education and skills development (Hamann et al. 2008). These measures aim to ensure more inclusive and sustainable economic empowerment across the broader black population.

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concepts and methodologies used throughout the article. Punt (2003:58) asserts that postcolonial biblical criticism is a collection of interpretive methods marked by their political and ideological motivations. This approach is focused on textual politics, involving both a hermeneutic of suspicion and a hermeneutic aimed at retrieval or restoration. Punt further argues that postcolonialism engages with colonial history and its consequences, addressing the history of oppression and rejection. It also involves uncovering truths and pursuing restoration and transformation. Similarly, Rukundwa (2008:339) posits that postcolonial theory is utilised as a method for biblical interpretation, aiming to uncover the colonial motives – whether political, cultural, or economic – that influenced the context of the biblical writers. Despite the critique directed at the church and other religious institutions, whether intentionally or unintentionally, supporting colonial conquests and imperialism worldwide, postcolonial theory encourages a constructive reading approach. He further notes that this approach allows readers to understand the universal mission of justice. When used as a tool for biblical interpretation, postcolonial theory treats the Bible as a *cultural product* trapped in time and space. However, there are significant conversion challenges such as ethnocentrism and anachronism, within the socio-scientific method. Nonetheless, regardless of the hermeneutical tool employed, the reader must achieve two key outcomes from Scripture reading: discovering life and discovering faith (Fitzgerald 2011:85). It is at the basis of this framework I wish to approach the subject under discussion.

Economic realities in post-1994 South Africa

The socio-economic landscape of South Africa is characterised by stark inequalities that have persisted since the presumed end of Apartheid in 1994. Despite being the most industrialised nation in Africa, South Africa continues to grapple with significant economic disparities. The Gini coefficient, a measure of income inequality, is among the highest in the world, reflecting profound disparities between the rich and the poor (World Bank 2020). One of the key challenges is unemployment, which has remained stubbornly high. As of 2021, the official unemployment rate was around 34.4%, with youth unemployment exceeding 50% (Stats SA 2021). This high unemployment rate is a critical factor in the persistent poverty experienced by many South Africans, particularly among the black population who were historically marginalised during Apartheid. Also, the legacy of Apartheid is evident in land ownership patterns. Despite various land reform initiatives, most of the arable land remains in the hands of a small, largely white minority (Aliber & Cousins 2013). This unequal land distribution continues a contentious issue, fuelling debates around land expropriation without compensation.

Educational disparities also contribute to economic inequalities. While the access to education has improved, the quality of education remains uneven, with schools in the disadvantaged areas often lacking basic resources and

infrastructure (Spaull 2013). This educational inequality perpetuates the cycle of poverty, as it limits opportunities for economic advancement for those from poorer backgrounds. The issue of salaries and salary scales in post-1994 South Africa, remains a significant indicator of efficient gaps, often reflecting deep-rooted racial inequalities. Despite the presumed end of Apartheid pre-1994 and establishing a democratic government, the financially viable landscape has not seen a proportionate transformation. Black South Africans, who constitute the majority, continue to face systemic barriers to economic equality. According to Statistics South Africa (2019), the wage gap between black and white workers persists, with white South Africans earning on the average three times more than their black counterparts. This disparity is further compounded by limited access to high-paying jobs and educational opportunities for black individuals, perpetuating a cycle of economic disadvantage (Statistics South Africa 2019).

Moreover, the phenomenon where a small fraction of black South Africans hold significant economic power, does little to alleviate the broader economic disparities. The notion that ‘money has eyes and does see race’, aptly describes the selective nature of economic opportunities, where black individuals with access to wealth often represent a negligible minority. As Seekings and Nattrass (2015) argue, economic policies and practices in the post-apartheid era have not sufficiently addressed the structural inequities inherited from the Apartheid regime. Consequently, while there are instances of BEE, these are often the exception rather than the rule, leaving the majority of black South Africans economically marginalised (Seekings & Nattrass 2015). The socio-economic inequalities in South Africa are starkly visible in the living conditions of marginalised and affluent communities. Marginalised communities, mostly black and coloured, often reside in rural areas while others reside in urban settings in informal settlements and townships with inadequate access to basic services such as clean water, sanitation and healthcare (Harrison & Todes 2015). These communities are also more likely to be affected by severe poverty, crime, and violence, and this further exacerbates their economic vulnerability.

On the other hand, affluent mainly white communities, enjoy a high standard of living with access to well-developed infrastructure and services. These communities are characterised by well-maintained neighbourhoods, quality education, and better healthcare facilities (Seekings & Nattrass 2005). The economic opportunities available to individuals in these communities are significantly greater, contributing to the perpetuation of economic disparities. The housing market further illustrates these disproportions. While some progress has been made in providing affordable housing, the demand far outstrips supply, leaving many low-income families in substandard living conditions. The backlog in housing delivery and the slow pace of urban land reform have compounded these issues (Tissington 2011).

The socio-economic and political context of Matthew in 1st-century Judea

Now having outlined the legacies and wounds caused by colonialism and Apartheid in South Africa, perhaps it is necessary to explore Matthew's text to navigate the economic ethics expressed, to see how the Matthean ethics resonates or relates to our South African landscape. However, we commence by looking at the world that informed the text of Matthew. First-century Palestine was a province under Roman domination, characterised by significant economic exploitation and social stratification. The Roman Empire imposed heavy taxation and tribute, exacerbating economic disparities between the elite and the impoverished majority. This colonial setting created a context where economic ethics were deeply intertwined with issues of power and resistance (Kakwata 2015:3–4; see also Horsley 1995). According to Häkkinen (2016:1–9), the Roman occupation of Judea was marked by a complex system of governance designed to maintain control and maximise economic exploitation. The 1st-century Judea was under the oppressive rule of the Roman Empire, which exerted control through a combination of military presence, political appointments, and economic exploitation. The Roman occupation began in 63 BCE when Pompey the Great conquered Jerusalem and incorporated Judea into the Roman Republic. By the time the Gospel of Matthew was written, likely between 80–85 CE, Judea had experienced several decades of Roman rule, characterised by heavy taxation, harsh legal measures, and cultural imposition (Goodman 2017).

The Roman authorities appointed local rulers, such as Herod the Great and his successors, who acted as intermediaries between Rome and the Jewish population. These rulers were often seen as collaborators, benefiting from Roman support while enforcing imperial policies (Youvan 2024:3–6). Herod the Great,² ruling Judea from 37 to 4 BCE, is renowned for his ambitious and extensive building projects, which included the expansion of the Second Temple, the construction of the port city of Caesarea Maritima, and the creation of numerous palaces and fortresses. These projects were instrumental in solidifying Herod's political power and securing favour with the Roman authorities. However, they came at a significant cost to the local population, who bore the burden of heavy taxation and labour conscription. As this article also aims to navigate into the implications of Herod's building initiatives, it is necessary to also explore the socio-economic and political ramifications for the people of Judea (Roller 1998). Hence, at this juncture, we aim to only briefly discuss Herod's projects that seem to contribute greatly to economic issues that created different responses and attitudes. From the empire's point of view, Herod's initiatives were praised, while from the margins they were detrimental, creating more gaps between the peasants and the elite.

²The affluent consisted of the Herodian family, the well-to-do high priestly clans, the surviving members of the traditional Jewish aristocracy, and the successful merchants who had not yet become part of the land-owning aristocracy (Reid 2004:942).

Herod's ambitious building projects

Expansion of the Second Temple

One of Herod's most notable projects was the expansion and beautification of the Second Temple in Jerusalem. This project, initiated in 20 BCE, aimed to transform the modest post-exilic structure into a grand and magnificent edifice befitting its status as the centre of Jewish worship. Herod's reconstruction involved doubling the Temple Mount's size, constructing massive retaining walls (including the Western Wall), and adorning the Temple with lavish decorations (Sanders 1993a; 1993b). The expanded Temple not only served religious purposes but also functioned as a symbol of Herod's piety and legitimacy as a ruler. By enhancing the Temple, Herod sought to gain the support of the Jewish populace and the priestly class, thereby strengthening his political position. Additionally, the Temple's grandeur impressed the Roman authorities, showcasing Herod's capability and loyalty as a client king (King 2012:8–29; Netzer 2006).

Caesarea Maritima

Herod's construction of Caesarea Maritima, a major port city on the Mediterranean coast, was another ambitious project. Completed around 10 BCE, Caesarea was named in honour of Augustus Caesar and featured a deep-water harbour, a Roman-style theatre, a hippodrome, and a grand palace. This city became the administrative centre of the Roman province of Judea and a vital hub for trade and commerce (Raban 1992a; 1992b). The construction of Caesarea Maritima demonstrated Herod's commitment to integrating Judea into the Roman economic and political sphere. It facilitated increased trade and communication with the broader Roman Empire, contributing to economic growth. However, the resources required for its construction and maintenance were significant, placing a heavy financial burden on the local population (Horsley 2003).

Palaces and fortresses

Herod also built numerous palaces and fortresses throughout Judea, including the Herodium, Masada, and the winter palace in Jericho. These structures served multiple purposes: they were symbols of Herod's wealth and power, provided protection against potential rebellions, and acted as luxurious retreats for the king and his court (Roller 1998). The fortresses were strategically located to safeguard against internal and external threats. Masada, for instance, was perched on a plateau overlooking the Dead Sea, making it nearly impregnable. These fortresses required substantial investments in terms of labour and materials, further straining the local economy (Netzer 2006).

Economic exploitation

Roman economic policies in Judea were designed to benefit the empire, often at the expense of local populations. Taxation was a significant burden, with various direct and indirect taxes levied on agricultural produce, goods, and personal income. The tax collectors, often local

collaborators, were notorious for their corruption and exploitation, exacerbating the economic distress of the peasantry and small landowners. The economic strain was exacerbated by the Roman practice of land appropriation and their local allies, leading to increased poverty and social stratification. Large tracts of land were confiscated and redistributed to Roman veterans or sold to wealthy elites, including Herod's supporters. This process led to the displacement of small farmers and increased the number of landless labourers, contributing to social unrest (Goodman 1999). Most of the Jewish population lived in agrarian communities, struggling to make ends meet under the oppressive economic policies imposed by the Roman authorities (Horsley 2003).

Religious and cultural tensions

The imposition of Roman culture and religion was another source of tension. The Romans promoted their gods and religious practices, often clashing with Jewish monotheistic beliefs and traditions. The construction of Roman temples and the introduction of imperial cult worship were seen as direct affronts to Jewish religious sensibilities (Goodman 2017). The Jewish response to these cultural impositions varied. Some groups, such as the Sadducees, sought accommodation with the Roman authorities, while others like the Pharisees and Zealots, advocated for resistance and adherence to Jewish laws and customs. This religious and cultural struggle was a defining feature of the period, influencing various Jewish sects and their interactions with the Roman occupiers (Horsley 2003). The tension between Roman and Jewish cultures and religions had significant economic implications during the Roman occupation of Judea. Here is a detailed analysis of how these religious and cultural tensions intersected with economic factors:

Economic burden of Roman taxation

The imposition of Roman rule brought heavy taxation, a major economic strain for the Jewish population. The Roman authorities levied taxes on land and goods, and imposed a tribute that was seen as a form of subjugation. This financial burden was exacerbated by the construction of Roman temples and infrastructure funded through these taxes (Goodman 2017). The economic strain contributed to widespread resentment and resistance among the Jewish population, as the funds were used to promote Roman religious practices that conflicted with their own (Häkkinen 2016:1–9; Horsley 2003).

Economic impact of imperial cult worship

The introduction of imperial cult worship required the construction of temples dedicated to Roman emperors. These construction projects involved significant expenditures and often led to the redirection of local resources to serve Roman interests (Goodman 2017). Jewish communities, who viewed these practices as blasphemous, resented the allocation of resources to these projects, which they felt could have been

used to support their own religious and communal needs (Horsley 2003).

Matthean economic ethics and related motifs

In this section, the goal is to outline the motifs that postcolonial hermeneutics navigate as they relate to the Matthean economic ethics. Hence, I contend that postcolonial criticism offers a valuable comprehension in examining the economic ethics of the Gospel of Matthew, especially in understanding how the text addresses issues of power, wealth, and justice. By considering the socio-political and economic contexts of the 1st-century Palestine under Roman rule, a postcolonial reading outlines how Matthew's Gospel speaks to the marginalised and critiques imperial structures. This section, to further the discussion of the article, will attend to various texts in Matthew's Gospel that speak to the economic issues. The goal is not to provide an exhaustive analysis, but only focus on a few passages in Matthew.

Wealth and poverty in a colonial context

The Beatitudes (Mt 5:3–12), which begin Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, can indeed be interpreted as a form of resistance literature. In their socio-historical context, the Beatitudes address a population oppressed by the Roman colonial system, affirming the inherent dignity and worth of those marginalised by socio-economic hierarchies. By pronouncing blessings upon the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, Jesus subverts the established order, positioning the downtrodden as the recipients of divine favour (Carter 2000:560; Sim 2001:9–16). This subversion of contemporary values challenges the legitimacy of the oppressive structures and provides a framework for envisioning a just society grounded in God's kingdom, where the last are first and the first are last (Wright 1996).

This interpretation is further supported by postcolonial biblical scholarship, which highlights how the Beatitudes resonate with the experiences of oppressed communities throughout history. Sugirtharajah (2002), for example, argues that the Beatitudes offer a counter-narrative to the dominant imperial ideologies, encouraging the marginalised to see themselves as blessed despite their suffering. This notion is echoed by Tamez (1993), who emphasises that the Beatitudes provide hope and empowerment to the oppressed, affirming their struggle for justice and righteousness. Additionally, Escobar (1980) and Segovia (1995) suggest that the Beatitudes serve as a call to action for the Christian community to stand in solidarity with the marginalised and to work towards the dismantling of unjust structures. This interpretation aligns with liberation theology's emphasis on God's preferential option for the poor and the call for social justice (Gutierrez 1973).

Matthew's Gospel critically engages with wealth and poverty, presenting them within a framework that challenges the socio-economic order upheld by the Roman Empire and

its local collaborators. The story of the rich young man (Mt 19:16–24) serves as a poignant critique of those who benefit from and sustain the economic exploitation of the masses. Through a postcolonial lens, this narrative underscores the inherent tension between the accumulation of wealth and the pursuit of spiritual and moral integrity within an oppressive economic system. The young man's inability to forsake his wealth and follow Jesus highlights the moral and spiritual dangers associated with complicity in the imperial economic structures (Carter 2001). This difficulty for the wealthy to enter the Kingdom of Heaven underscores a broader critique of an economic order that prioritises material wealth over communal well-being and justice (Warren 2002).

The critique of wealth in Matthew's Gospel extends beyond the individual to a systemic level, calling into question the broader socio-economic structures that perpetuate inequality and exploitation. Postcolonial scholars argue that Matthew's Gospel, through its emphasis on the difficulty for the wealthy to attain spiritual fulfilment, aligns with a broader theological narrative that champions the cause of the poor and marginalised. Sugirtharajah (2001) posits that this narrative is a form of resistance literature, offering a counter-narrative to the imperial ideology that equates wealth with divine favour. Instead, Matthew presents a vision of God's kingdom where the last shall be the first, and the first shall become the last, subverting the existing hierarchies and advocating for a more just and equitable society (Myers 1991). This critique is further echoed in the parables and teachings of Jesus throughout Matthew's Gospel, which consistently challenge the socio-economic norms of the time and advocate for a radical reordering of societal values and priorities (Crossan 1998).

Generosity and almsgiving as acts of resistance

Generosity and almsgiving in Matthew, such as in Matthew 6:1–4, extend beyond personal virtues, functioning as acts of resistance against the economic oppression of the Roman Empire. Jesus's teachings emphasise discreet and sincere giving, contrasting with the public displays of piety and charity by the elite, who used such acts to elevate their social status and maintain power (Luz 2007). For instance, while the wealthy often flaunted their almsgiving to secure favour or assert dominance, Jesus encourages an ethic of humility and solidarity, where generosity stems from compassion rather than self-promotion. This promotes an alternative communal ethic, prioritising the welfare of the poor and fostering a sense of equality and resistance to the social hierarchies imposed by both Roman and local authorities. Examples of this include communal sharing among early Christian communities (Ac 2:44–45) and mutual aid networks that provided for the needs of the marginalised, which further emphasised a countercultural model of economic justice.

The kingdom of God as a counter-narrative

In the context of Roman oppression, the exhortation in Matthew 6:33 to 'seek first his kingdom and his righteousness'

serves as a profound counter-narrative to the prevailing imperial ideology. The Roman Empire's claims of bringing peace and prosperity through military conquest and economic exploitation are starkly contrasted with the values of God's kingdom, which prioritise justice, peace, and righteousness (Wright 1996). The kingdom of God, as depicted in Matthew, is an eschatological reality that breaks into the present world, offering an alternative vision of society. This kingdom is characterised by justice for the oppressed, mercy for the poor, and righteousness that transcends legalistic piety. By urging his audience to seek this kingdom, Matthew calls them to align their lives with God's transformative vision, resisting the dehumanising forces of Roman imperialism (Horsley 2003).

Justice and righteousness against imperial oppression

The Matthean Jesus frequently addresses justice and righteousness, critiquing the religious leaders who often collaborated with the Roman authorities. For example, in Matthew 23 Jesus condemns the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees, who burden the people with heavy loads while failing to practice justice, mercy, and faithfulness. This critique extends to economic practices, advocating for fairness and the protection of the vulnerable against imperial exploitation (Hagner 1993). The concept of righteousness in Matthew's Gospel is multifaceted, encompassing both personal integrity and social justice. In the Jewish tradition, righteousness (צדקה, *tsedakah*) involves living in the right relationship with God and others, reflecting divine justice in human interactions. This includes acts of charity, fairness, and advocacy for the marginalised (Keener 1999).

For Matthew's audience, seeking righteousness would have been a radical act of defiance against both Roman oppression and any form of corruption within their community. It called them to embody the values of God's kingdom in their daily lives, challenging systems of exploitation and injustice. This emphasis on righteousness is a recurring theme in the Gospel, highlighting the ethical demands of discipleship (Davies & Allison 1988).

The parable of the workers in the vineyard (Mt 20:1–16) can be read as a challenge to the economic logic of the Roman Empire. By emphasising God's generosity and the equal treatment of all workers, the parable subverts the meritocratic and hierarchical economic structures imposed by the empire. It calls for an economy based on divine justice rather than imperial exploitation (Meier 1980).

Compassion and spiritual accountability (Mt 25:31–46)

The parable of the sheep and the goats, found in Matthew 25:31–46, is a profound passage that underlines the ethical imperative of caring for the marginalised, often referred to as the *least of these*. This parable not only encapsulates the core of Jesus's teachings on compassion and justice but also offers

a framework for understanding economic justice as an essential component of spiritual accountability. In the context of postcolonial South Africa, this parable provides significant comprehension of how economic disparities can be addressed through the lens of Christian ethics.

The parable describes the final judgement, where the Son of Man separates people into two groups, symbolised as sheep and goats. The *sheep* are those who have performed acts of kindness and mercy, such as feeding the hungry, welcoming strangers, and visiting the sick and imprisoned. The *goats* are those who failed to perform these acts. The striking aspect of this parable is that Jesus equates the treatment of the marginalised with the treatment of himself, stating, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me' (Mt 25:40, NIV).

Economic justice in the parable

The parable directly ties spiritual fate to acts of social justice. Recent scholarship has emphasised the economic implications of this text. For instance, Carter (2019) argues that the parable challenges the socioeconomic structures that perpetuate inequality by prioritising the well-being of the marginalised over the accumulation of wealth. This interpretation suggests that economic justice is not merely a social concern, but a spiritual obligation. This parable serves as a call to action for both individuals and institutions. As West (2016) points out, the economic liberation of South Africa's marginalised communities requires a concerted effort that includes addressing historical injustices and promoting equitable resource distribution.

A theoretical framework on economic ethics from a theological perspective

At this juncture, the goal is to outline a theoretical framework as a general background for Matthew's economic ethics. This is a significant reason to situate Matthew's economic ethics. Hence, a theoretical framework on economic ethics from a theological perspective is rooted in the biblical principles of justice, fairness, and stewardship. Central to these ethical thoughts is the concept of biblical justice (often represented by the Hebrew term *mishpat*) and righteousness (*tsedeq*), which emphasise fairness in economic and social relationships (Peprah 2023). These principles are evident throughout Scripture, where God's people are commanded to care for the marginalised – such as the poor, widows, and orphans – and ensure fairness in the treatment of labourers (Dt 24:14-15; Ja 5:4). As Wright (2004) explains, these ethical mandates have evolved in Christian theology as a broader call for social justice, in addressing contemporary issues of inequality and unfair economic practices.

Another foundational concept in theological economic ethics is stewardship, which posits that human beings are entrusted with the care of God's creation, including resources and

wealth. This is not merely a matter of personal gain but is framed in the context of communal responsibility. McGrath (1997) suggests that biblical stewardship emphasises the responsible use of wealth in ways that benefit society. This principle has been developed further in modern theological discourse, especially in liberation theology, which critiques economic systems that exacerbate poverty and inequality. As Gutiérrez (1988) argues, stewardship demands that Christians engage with economic structures that protect and enhance the well-being of the community, especially the poor and marginalised.

This aligns closely with the teachings found in Matthew's Gospel, where Jesus repeatedly emphasises the importance of caring for 'the least of these' (Mt 25:31-46). In the South African context, where economic inequality remains a pressing challenge, this principle provides a theological rationale for advocating economic justice and reform. Modern scholars, such as Sider (1997), have explored how these biblical principles can be applied to critiques of contemporary economic systems. Sider, for example, critiques neoliberal economics, which often prioritises profit over human welfare, and advocates for economic models that reflect biblical ideals of justice and fairness. By incorporating these theological insights into a contemporary framework, the church is positioned to offer meaningful responses to economic challenges in contexts such as South Africa, where structural inequalities continue to affect the poor and marginalised. By establishing this theoretical foundation, you can bridge the ancient context of Matthew's Gospel with the modern South African economic situation. This attempt will clarify how biblical teachings on justice, fairness, and stewardship can be applied to the church in addressing contemporary economic issues.

The role of the church in addressing economic injustices in South Africa

To address the economic injustices in South Africa is a complex and manifold issue. It requires the church to examine the historical and contemporary contexts critically. The church has historically played a significant role in South African society, particularly during the Apartheid era, where it served as both a site of resistance and complicity. In the post-apartheid period, the church's role in addressing economic injustices remains vital, but it faces numerous challenges (Mkhize 2024:1-8). One significant challenge is the decline in public trust and moral authority, as some churches have been criticised for aligning with political powers or prioritising institutional interests over social justice. The church also often struggles with internal divisions over addressing economic issues, particularly regarding land reform and wealth redistribution. For example, debates within the church about whether to actively support land restitution efforts or maintain a neutral stance have hindered and unified action on addressing structural inequalities in South Africa.

The church in South Africa has a dual legacy when it comes to social justice issues. On the one hand, churches such as the Dutch Reformed Church supported Apartheid, legitimising economic inequalities that disproportionately affected black South Africans (Kruger & Van der Merwe 2017; Sekhalelo 2016:1–8). On the other hand, various Christian denominations, particularly within the liberation theology movement, actively opposed Apartheid and worked toward social justice, with figures like Desmond Tutu leading the charge (Villa-Vicencio 1988). This historical involvement in both promoting and resisting economic injustices, provides a foundation for understanding the church's current role in addressing these issues.

The legacy of Apartheid in South Africa is closely tied to the dispossession of land from black South Africans. The 1913 Natives Land Act, which allocated only 7% of arable land to the black majority, laid the groundwork for systemic landlessness, a condition exacerbated by decades of Apartheid policies (Walker 2008). Many churches, particularly those aligned with the Apartheid regime, either supported or remained silent on these injustices. However, some religious movements and leaders actively opposed these policies and advocated for the return of land to the dispossessed. The Dutch Reformed Church, for example was implicated in the ideological support of Apartheid, while other Christian groups, including those inspired by liberation theology, challenged these injustices (De Gruchy 2004).

Contemporary role

In contemporary South Africa, the church continuously plays a crucial role in advocating for economic justice, particularly in the widespread poverty and inequality. According to Stats SA (2022), the Gini coefficient, which measures income inequality, remains one of the highest in the world, highlighting the ongoing economic disparities in the country. The church has a moral and social responsibility to address these inequalities, which often manifest along racial and economic lines.

Advocacy and moral leadership

One of the primary roles of the church is to provide moral leadership and advocacy. The church can use its moral authority to speak out against economic injustices and advocate for policies to promote economic equity. For instance, many churches have supported land reform initiatives to redress the historical injustices of land dispossession (Boesak 2015). Through public statements, sermons, and participation in social movements, the church opts to influence public opinion and policy-making processes.

The church has a moral responsibility to advocate for land reform policies that aim to redress historical injustices. Land reform is not just a matter of economic redistribution but also a restorative act that addresses the historical wrongs inflicted upon the black majority. Many churches have been vocal in

their support for land reform initiatives, aligning themselves with movements that seek to return land to its rightful owners. For example, the South African Council of Churches (SACC) has consistently called for land redistribution policies that prioritise justice and equity, emphasising the need for a peaceful resolution to the land question (SACC 2017).

Social services and empowerment programmes

Another crucial role of the church is to provide social services and empowerment programmes to alleviate the immediate effects of economic injustices. Many churches run programmes that provide food, education, and healthcare to marginalised communities. These programmes are essential in addressing the symptoms of economic injustice, although they do not necessarily tackle the root causes. Furthermore, the church can play a role in empowering communities through skills development and economic empowerment initiatives, which can help individuals to break the cycle of poverty. Beyond advocacy, the church can also play a direct role in land restitution and redistribution efforts. Some denominations have taken steps to return land owned by the church to communities that were dispossessed during Apartheid. These actions, though symbolic, contribute to the broader struggle for land justice in South Africa. Some churches in Southern Africa for instance, have been involved in initiatives to return church-owned land to dispossessed communities, thus setting an example for other institutions (Forster 2010).

The issue of landlessness among the black majority is intricately linked to broader economic injustices. The church can address landlessness through advocacy for land reform, and also by supporting programmes that empower landless individuals and communities (Resane 2019:1–9). This includes providing resources for sustainable agriculture, supporting small-scale farming initiatives, and advocating for policies that ensure land tenure security for vulnerable populations. Empowerment programmes run by churches can help landless individuals gain access to land and resources, thereby breaking the cycle of poverty and economic marginalisation (Boesak 2015). The church can also promote ethical business practices among its congregants and the broader society. By encouraging businesses to operate fair, just, and environmentally sustainable, the church can contribute to a more equitable economy. This could involve promoting corporate social responsibility, fair trade, and ethical investment practices prioritising social and environmental outcomes alongside financial returns (Fourie 2012:47–57).

Challenges and criticisms

Despite these efforts, the church's role in addressing economic injustices is not without challenges. One significant challenge is the church's historical complicity in land dispossession, which undermines its moral authority

on the issue. Furthermore, there is often a gap between the church's rhetoric on economic justice and its actual practices, with some churches prioritising spiritual over social issues (Modise 2018:13–15). Moreover, the church's influence is often limited by its declining membership and the increasing secularisation of South African society (Chidester 2014). The church must also navigate the complex political landscape of land reform in South Africa, where competing interests and tensions can hinder meaningful progress (De Gruchy 2004).

Conclusion

Matthew's Gospel, viewed through a postcolonial lens, reveals a theological vision that challenges imperial domination by advocating for an alternative socio-political reality rooted in God's vision of a just society. This vision calls for economic behaviour grounded in justice, generosity, and mercy, opposing the exploitative structures of the Roman Empire. The South African church has a crucial role in addressing economic injustices, particularly regarding land reform and landlessness. To do so effectively, it must confront its historical complicity in land dispossession. Matthew's economic teachings remain relevant today, urging contemporary readers to critically assess their economic practices and work toward creating a more just and equitable society by embodying the radical ethics of Jesus. This article does by no means suggest easy solutions to the issues discussed but rather seeks to contribute to these ongoing struggles of our country. That is the value of postcolonial reading to help us to keep on reflecting critically on such issues with the hope of imagining and creating a cohesive society.

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