CHAPTER ONE

SCARCITY, FAITH AND WISDOM

""Accursed be the soil because of you. With suffering shall you get your food from it every day of your life. It shall yield you brambles and thistles, and you shall eat wild plants. With sweat on your brow shall you eat your bread, until you return to the soil, as you were taken from it."

The Book of Genesis 3:17-19

The initial exploration of the nature and origins of the economic problem in biblical literature is mainly attributable to the Yahwist. This author (or, group of authors) is also responsible for the exposition of certain of the strategies that might be adopted to cope with that problem. Most probably, the Yahwist wrote during the reign of Solomon in Judah (c. 965-926 B.C.), or a little later. He brought together much of the then current lore concerning primeval history in a new and powerful synthesis.1 Because of its sharp, analytical thrust, the synthesis has remained a remarkably potent influence in the evolution of ideas across the centuries.

For this early writer, there is no doubt that the problem of scarcity is an ever-present burden for the bulk of mankind. Nature is not especially beneficient, and the acquisition of the means of life is a task involving continual struggle and personal cost. Such sentiments are not uncommon in surviving examples of other early ancient writings, and they may be compared, for example, with those of the Greek poet, Hesiod (c. 700 B.C.).2 However, the Yahwist's treatment of scarcity has a distinctive character in that it involves the idea that humanity was not designed originally to be subject to the pressures involved. Further, the treatment denies that work is a feature of the human condition which is exclusively engendered by the pressures of scarcity. This latter is in marked contrast with the Greek tradition on the question.3

3 In the Greek tradition, work is, "the most oppressive misfortune that Zeus imposes upon men from their very birth." (Homer, Iliad, 10, 71). Work is a type of punishment, and nothing else.
Sarcity and Work

The origins of the economic problem, according to the Yahwist, are located in the Fall of Man. Originally, the Creator ordained that the means of life should be freely available:

"Yahweh God caused to spring up from the soil every kind of tree, enticing to look at and good to eat... Then Yahweh God gave man this admonition, 'You may eat indeed of all the trees in the garden. Nevertheless of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you are not to eat for on the day you eat it you shall most surely die.'" (Gen. 2:9, 16).

This situation alters radically when mankind chooses to try to capitalise on the most distinctive attribute with which it has been endowed, i.e., the gift of the ability to disobey its Creator. Instead of remaining satisfied with the beneficence of Yahweh, humans decide to take control of the entire range of their choices as consumers of the fruits of creation. In Yahwistic terms, Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit (Gen. 3:1-6).

Since men and women have decided to care for their own welfare as far as consumption is concerned, there is no way in which Yahweh can honour that choice except by freeing them from their former state of dependence as consumers. They must leave Eden if they are to live as they have chosen. They have taken upon themselves the problem of scarcity, a problem which it was not intended they should be obliged to face.

Given that mankind is not designed to cope with its chosen independence, it might be expected that this form of creation would quickly disappear from the face of the earth outside Eden. However, this is not the case. The reason is that these creatures were designed to be workers and were invested with the ability to innovate. They were not intended for an existence of idle enjoyment of the Creator’s largesse in Paradise. Rather, they were made in the image of the God who works. Humans were settled in the Garden, "to cultivate and take care of it." (Gen. 2:15, see also, 2:5).

Work precedes the Fall and the onset of scarcity. For the Yahwist, its basic rationale is not the satisfaction of the worker’s needs as a consumer. Instead, its chief significance is in its fulfilling an ordinance of God which relates to man’s very being. This point has been observed by a variety of modern commentators among whom is Alan Richardson. He finds that the Yahwistic texts,

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4 Von Rad comments (op.cit., p. 97) that here, man has, "stepped outside the state of dependence, he has refused obedience and willed to make himself independent." On this and the related themes, consult the outstanding analysis by, C. Westermann, Creation (London: S.P.C.K., 1974), esp., pp. 80-90, 100-103.