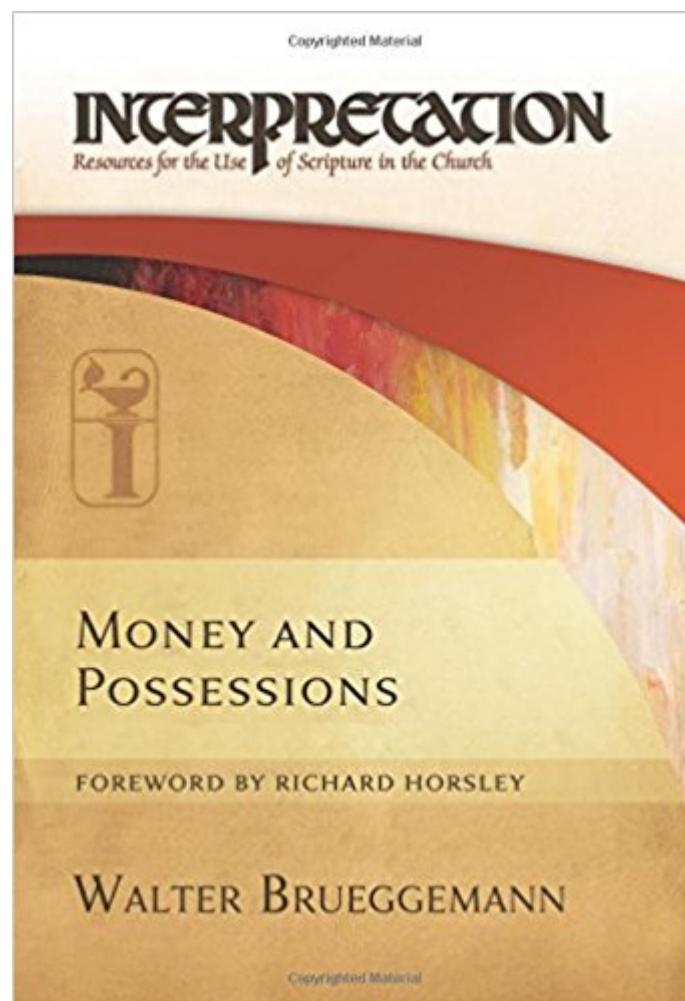




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# Money And Possessions (Interpretation: Resources For The Use Of Scripture In The Church)



## Synopsis

The Bible is rich with complex and diverse material on the topic of money and possessions. Indeed, a close look at many scriptural texts reveals that economics is a core preoccupation of the biblical tradition. In this new work, highly regarded preacher and scholar Walter Brueggemann explores the recurring theme of money and possessions in the Old and New Testaments. He proposes six theses concerning money and possessions in the Bible, observing their contradictory nature to the conventional wisdom and practice of both the ancient world and today's society. Brueggemann advises us to reassess the ways in which our society engages—or does not engage—questions of money and possessions as carriers of social possibility. He invites the church to move toward an alternative neighborly economy that is more consistent with the gospel we confess.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Walter Brueggemann is William Marcellus McPheeters Professor Emeritus of Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary. An ordained minister in the United Church of Christ, he is the author of dozens of books, including *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now*, *Journey to the Common Good*, and *Chosen? Reading the Bible amid the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*.

"Discipleship is the renunciation of [money's] anxiety-producing power; practically that renunciation

is performed as generosity that is free of greed and has no fear of scarcity." There are several "mic-drop" quotes in this book, like this one, that make you just pause and reflect on what you have just read. The book is worth its price for these gems sprinkled throughout its pages. As an author and professional in the "Christian Stewardship" space, I've read 30+ books on money. Last week, a team member asked me what they should read if they want to dig deeper and know more about God's heart for our finances. I gave them this book. Most books on money repackage what has already been said, but Brueggemann brings some truly fresh insight. Even when I disagreed with him (rarely) I was able to follow his reasoning and respect his position. The cookies are not necessarily on the bottom shelf in this book - this is a serious book for the intellectually-engaged reader. But if that is you, then you should check it out. It will be worth your time. I would highly recommend this book to anyone desiring a serious and sustained inquiry into a Christian perspective on financial life.

Brueggemann does a beautiful job of blending together dutiful exegesis and prophetic application. He examines the way that money and possessions are treated in the biblical text, but he also is willing to examine how we then should live in light of those facts.

Outstandingly Brueggemann!

Money is a touchy subject for many people. That is why many preachers avoid talking about it because it has become so 'sensitive.' Yet, Jesus talks a lot about money and possessions. Preachers ought to get the hint, simply because the influence of money and the impact on possessions are profoundly pervasive in many societies. Wars have been fought on many fronts just to gain a foothold on the fountains of monetary gains. In this book, renowned author and theologian, Walter Brueggemann has gone beyond the gospels to take a look at what the entire Bible speaks about money and possessions. Put it another way, if the Bible is about God, it is also warning us about the dangers of idolatry. Unlike commentaries that are inductive in nature, examining the Scriptures for what it is saying, this Interpretation series of resources are more topical in nature. They look at what the entire Bible has to say about certain important topics through the ages, from the biblical era to modern times. In this book, Walter Brueggemann expands, explains, and expounds on the application of money and possessions on a whole range of societal matters. Through both the Old and New Testaments, he identifies relevant areas of applications and points out the pervasiveness of this particular area of our life and contrasts that with what it means to live as

a believer in a culture of individualism, materialism, and consumerism. If there is one word to describe Brueggemann's understanding of the Bible, it would be two words: "Counter Culture." The author is currently William Marcellus McPheeters Professor Emeritus of Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary. He is a popular speaker and writer and one of his most impactful books is "The Prophetic Imagination." He resides in Cincinnati, Ohio with his wife, Tia. He is convinced that the Bible makes "rich, recurring, and diverse references to money and possessions." Right from the onset, he argues that materialism is a threat to faith. He makes several striking observations. He says that the biblical worldview of seeing money as gifts from God counters the way the world structures of effort-reward. What we get is based on how much we invest. This makes the idea of works-based living very prevalent in societies throughout history. This brings along a lot of other implications like the tendency to hang on tightly to what we have earned, especially those things that had been won with sweat and blood. Such thinking impacts the spirit of giving and generosity in a negative way. There are also those who see the lack of riches and materialism as a punishment for those who didn't do enough to earn them. Thus, the rich look down on the poor and the wealth-poverty divide gets enlarged. This also leads to a corrupted view of charity where the rich despises the poor and offer handouts only as a way to enhance their own images. Other implications are the increase in individualism, selfish living, and greed. Brueggemann shows us the biblical views that are consistent from the Old to the New Testament. In the Exodus narrative, Israel was warned about covetousness and God even enshrined that in the last of the Ten Commandments. There is a strong motif against material anxiety which is an antithesis of faith and trust in God. In Deuteronomy, we learn how riches impact neighbourliness. Readers are consistently warned about material things ensnaring them from generous living. The idea of the Sabbath is a test of how much Israel is willing to trust God as Divine Provider of all things. The historical books talk about Israel's life after they entered the Promised Land. We see how kings and leaders get tempted by material things and subsequently lead their nation downward. We see how materialism continues to exert its influence even when Israel was in exile. From the Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian Empires that conquered them, we see the rise of elite Jews who became wealthy and powerful. In these narratives, we see how the wealth and riches became connected with idols and worship. Money became a key driver in the restoration to the temple. The Psalms is an interesting summary of worship and living. Ps 1 begins with a declaration of the place of the Word of God being supreme with the rest of the Psalms detailing the struggles of the human heart toggling back and forth being human and desiring the divine. Proverbs and Job contain many practical ways to think about money and possessions. They all point out what it means to love God and to love neighbour. The Prophets

present one of the most powerful examples of how the minority voice stood up against the majority culture. With amazing insight, Brueggemann weaves together his gift of prophetic imagination as he pulls in facets of socio-economic life. He even traces the disruption of the kingdom of Israel to a tax revolt in 1 Kings 12:1-19! In the New Testament, he repeats what the gospels had been saying all along: Create an alternative economy anchored on God. Acts extends the influence of Jesus through the disciples and we see how the Holy Spirit works mighty wonders and counters the excessiveness and influences of material goods. Paul's ministry was also shrouded with lots of references to money matters and how the use and abuse of material things can lead to the rise and fall of a community at large. We learn from the pastoral epistles how money can be a test for leadership. We learn from the book of James about the practice of faith. We see the book of Revelation as the climax of an alternative economy. I find the Old Testament parts of the book a lot more engaging, probably because of the author's expertise in all things Old Testament. Moreover, the length of the Old Testament material subtly suggests that Brueggemann has more things to say from the Old compared to the New. I was a little surprised at the brevity of the chapter from the Psalms. With over 150 chapters in this book alone, surely, there are a lot more that has been left out! Having said that, there are also many references to the New Testament in his treatment of the earlier chapters. He brings in pertinent aspects of the gospel. Using the topic of money and possessions as the key theme, he points out how pervasive it is for modern readers to be aware of. Here are three thoughts with regard to this book. First, this book is counter-cultural in the way we see bible commentaries. While many of us are used to inductive approaches when it comes to commentaries, where the texts and contexts inform our interpretation, this series takes on a more deductive approach, or simply put, a more topical style of interpretation. Having said that, it is good to know that there are not many topics that allow us to do that. Money, possessions, and idolatry are common themes through the entire Bible, which is one reason to legitimize this approach. Second, see the book not simply as a warning against money and possessions, but against the excesses and the abuses of such things. Learn from history, from the folly of many of the ancestors of old. Learn about the way such material things have corrupted the people heart, mind, and soul. Appreciate the value of the Ten Commandments and the warnings against covetousness. If these things have the power to bring down kings and kingdoms, surely these things can easily bring any of us down. Finally, see this book as a book of hope. The Bible is relevant not just in history but very much so for today. If we can overcome the temptations of material things, just like how Jesus overcame the three temptations in the desert, we are on our way to a very profound growth and spiritual progression in our journey of faith. This temptation is not to be trifled with because it lurks

not only in the shadows but has the power to influence us from the inside out. Perhaps, one of the most instructive passages from Scripture is this: 7“Two things I ask of you, Lord; do not refuse me before I die: 8Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. 9Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, ‘Who is the Lord?’ Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God. Billy Graham once said: "There is nothing wrong with men possessing riches. The wrong comes when riches possess men." I am glad to say that this book does warn us precisely about this. Rating: 4 stars of 5. This book is provided to me courtesy of Westminster John Knox Press and NetGalley in exchange for an honest review. All opinions offered above are mine unless otherwise stated or implied.

Money and possessions matter. They might not always come up explicitly in our ordinary, everyday conversations, but when Jesus tells His disciples to sell their possessions because "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Luke 12:34, NRSV) or bluntly says, "You cannot serve God and wealth" (Luke 16:13, NRSV) His words are especially challenging for many of us because they ring deeply true, even if we usually avoid thinking about them. Nevertheless, we often try to keep faith and money in separate spheres of life. In his new volume, *Money and Possessions*, Walter Brueggemann insists that this is both unsustainable and undesirable: "We live in a society that would like to bracket out money and possessions (politics and economics) from ultimate questions. The Bible insists otherwise" (p.12). Given the vast number of relevant biblical texts, any discussion of wealth and possessions in Scripture cannot avoid being selective. Nevertheless, Brueggemann's striking overview is a valuable resource that many Christians will hopefully appreciate. He's an Old Testament scholar, and it's in the portions of the book dealing with the Hebrew Bible that his command of the biblical material and passion as a theologian come through most clearly. In the chapters exploring money and possessions in the New Testament, Brueggemann is—as he himself admits—as on more unfamiliar ground (p.xx). Hence, he turns more frequently to the works of New Testament scholars like Luke Timothy Johnson (See especially his *Sharing Possessions: What Faith Demands*. 2nd Ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2011)) and Ellen F. Davis in the latter chapters of the book. *Israel's Testimony Regarding Wealth and Justice* Within the Old Testament narratives, the Exodus looms large, both in general and in terms of money and possessions. That makes it significant to see at the core of Israel's testimony the command given at Sinai, "You shall not covet..." (Exodus 20:17, NRSV) Brueggemann contends that this prohibition against coveting is a

central feature of the books placed at the beginning of the Old Testament canon (p.15). He explains, "the term 'covet' in truth concerns not only an attitude of wanting but also an action of taking... The prohibition concerns the acquiring of what belongs to another" (pp.16-17). Such unchecked wanting/taking of possessions is harmful not just because it's against God's will but because it ignores the well-being of one's neighbor: It is the reality of the neighbor that is the God-acknowledged check on addictive acquisitiveness. The neighbor is a line that must not be transgressed, because the neighbor is an undeniable social fact that will not go away. (p.17) For Brueggemann, it is important to look at Israel's Sinai-defined vision of life in the contrasting light of their time in Egypt. Concerns of neighborliness weren't on Pharaoh's horizon. Brueggemann comments that while God's people are called to love persons and use commodities, Pharaoh did precisely the opposite, choosing instead to use people and love commodities (p.25). For Pharaoh, the Sabbath is a preposterous idea. Therefore, we shouldn't be surprised to find the Sabbath near the center of Israel's post-Exodus vision of life since, "It is an active form of resistance against insatiable desire... coveting is in contradiction to the alternative of sabbath" (pp.21-23). Studying the Old Testament's wisdom literature through the lens of money and possessions, especially in the Book of Proverbs, can be complicated. Brueggemann affirms that, "for the most part, wisdom teaching is committed to the proposition that creation is ordered so that deeds produce consequences" (p.121). Proverbs encourages readers at multiple points to pursue diligence and avoid laziness so that they avoid poverty (For example, Proverbs 10:4, 12:11, 12:27, 14:23). Does this mean that Proverbs imagines laziness to be the only cause of poverty? Brueggemann suggests this line of interpretation is overly-simplistic, pointing out that Proverbs also contains many passages that display a deep concern for the poor and deconstruct assumptions about the autonomy of personal wealth (Proverbs 14:31, 21:13, 22:9, 29:7). Yes, money and possessions are gifts from God (1 Chronicles 29:10-22). Nevertheless, those with money have neighborly obligations. Wealth "is not... to be secured at the expense of or withdrawal from the common good" (p.129). The majority of the Old Testament is concerned, at least in Brueggemann's eyes, not with extolling the goodness of riches, but rather with calling out those who pursue possessions without restraint and unmercifully ignore those in need. These matters are profoundly theological in addition to practical. Greed, coveting, and idolatry are unfortunately connected to one another in Brueggemann's eyes (pp.38-40). Hopefully, I'm not the only one who is immensely challenged by this to be more intentional about how (and where) I spend my money, and to grow in charity. There is more of Brueggemann's survey of the Old Testament that we could go into (his exploration of the Psalms and prophetic books, for example, do not disappoint), but for the sake of

space we must turn to the book's examination of the New Testament. Money and Possessions in the New Testament It may be because he was forced to condense his exploration of money and possessions in the Gospels into a single chapter, but I repeatedly experienced a desire for Brueggemann to slow down and dig more deeply into scripturally relevant passages as he surveyed them. This isn't a major criticism of the book, given the space constraints and his background in the Hebrew Bible, but I admit that I found Brueggemann's treatment of the Gospels to be less thorough than his chapters on the Old Testament. Nevertheless, Brueggemann finds in the Gospels a portrayal of Jesus as someone who cared about material issues, especially when it came to how those on the margins of society suffered at the hands of an "economy of extraction" practiced by Roman authorities and other ruling powers (p.187). Brueggemann highlights the radical either-or nature of Jesus's teachings regarding God and wealth (for example, Luke 16:13) when he says: The choice required is complete and nonnegotiable... if the either-or of God/Mammon is taken seriously, the economy must be deprived of its sacred character and its sacred power. That is, it must be "profaned"... it can be seen that the giving of alms is an act that profanes money, robs it of its sacred quality, and submits it to the rule of God, who is, as Creator, always generously giving. (pp.194-195) With the parable in Matthew 25:31-46, Brueggemann deems it to be, in regards to material goods, "an insistence that material resources (money and possessions) are not an autonomous zone" but are possessed in the context of community (p.200). Given the emphasis on looking out for one's neighbor in these texts, I'd also suggest that Jesus's expansion of the definition of "neighbor" in the parable of the Good Samaritan is surely relevant to this topic. Reviewing Paul's perspective on these issues is difficult, according to Brueggemann, because "his views on money and possessions are scattered throughout his letters and admit of diversity and complexity" (p.219). It's clear, though, that the overwhelming nature of God's gift in Christ was central to Paul. Hence, Brueggemann brings up 1 Corinthians 4:7 ("What do you have that you did not receive?" (NRSV)) to suggest that for Paul, all of life is based on the gift of God in Christ. While Paul's words aren't centered on economic concerns, Brueggemann suggests that they are nevertheless relevant to them. Turning to Romans 12, we see Paul pleading with his audience to be transformed in conformity to Christ so that they no longer live according to the pattern of "this world" (Romans 12:2, NRSV). Brueggemann brings this admonition into the realm of economic concerns when he suggests that it also means that Christians need not be conformed to the economic assumptions and practices of this "present economic world" (p.222). In Galatians 6, Paul begins by urging his readers to "bear one another's burdens," but then finishes by also saying that "all must carry their own loads" (Galatians 6:2-5, NRSV). How should readers make sense of this? Here, Brueggemann

turns to perspective of Richard Hays, who stresses the importance of reading both these verses together, thereby allowing us to maintain them in tension and affirm both that we are personally accountable to God and called to live in community, mutually helping one another (p.235). I wish we could take the time to stroll through Brueggemann's chapters on money and possessions in James, Hebrews, and the Book of Revelation. Unfortunately, we must shift instead to a few closing observations. I do, however, want to point out that the Letter of James especially echoes themes found in the Old Testament's wisdom literature, and Revelation is distinctive in its use of Israel's prophetic language in order to give hope to followers of Christ and call out the exploitative practices of the Roman world (pp.250, 266-67).

**Conclusion** So what can we say about money and possessions in Scripture, as we reach the end of this review? Regardless of how we come into possession of wealth, it is seen theologically as a gift from God. Ultimately, it still belongs to God and is "held in trust by human persons in community" (pp.1-4). This is probably the claim that most strongly supports Christian language of financial stewardship. Sadly, "Money and possessions are [also] sources of social injustice" (p.5). It seems unfortunately true that humans are predisposed in this fallen world to destructively oppress others in order to gain money and power. Because of this, the Bible strongly connects remembering God with treating neighbors justly on the one hand, and forgetting God with falling into greed and idolatry on the other (p.5). For me, Brueggemann successfully demonstrates in this book that faith and money can't be kept in separate spheres of life without doing damage to the flourishing of Christian life. How should this impact the lives of Brueggemann's readers? Surely in many ways. Reading *Money and Possessions* reminded me of C.S. Lewis's words on charity in *Mere Christianity*: I do not believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare. In other words, if our expenditure on comforts, luxuries, amusements, etc., is up to the standard common among those with the same income as our own, we are probably giving away too little. (C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*. in *The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classics*. (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2002), 77)) Lewis's words may be specifically about personal giving, but they do a good job of smashing through the defenses we often put up in order to keep discussions about money and possessions "safe" and unchallenging. Some might fear that Brueggemann's reading reduces the Bible's concerns to merely economic matters; I think that is far from true. However, it does highlight the material dimensions of faith Scripture. I'm glad I read *Money and Possessions*, but maybe more importantly, I'm challenged to live like I read it, both personally and in community.

\*Disclosure: I received this book free from Westminster John Knox Press for review purposes. The opinions I have expressed are my own, and I was not required to write a positive review. \*\*More theology book

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