

“No Heritage in the Land”

By WALDO E. LAKE

AMONG all the books in our vast repertory of economic literature, the Bible is one which has never been duly credited. This great source has been extolled for its literary excellence, history, prophecy and poetry, but seldom for its economic significance.

The theme of the Bible is justice. It gives a vivid account of human experience, and in its denunciation of moral abnegation it minces no words. The record of the kings of Israel is a good example. Under the rule of the judges the people enjoyed a rather prosperous democracy but, undoubtedly inspired by a few self interested leaders, they wanted a king such as other nations had.

In protest against this move, Samuel, the last of the judges, gave a really great talk that should be in the hall of fame for economic speeches, if there were such a thing. But he was overruled. So, calling for divine help, he selected the ablest man afforded by the nation. In the ensuing years there was a long line of kings, each of whom, after a good beginning, fell from grace and brought disaster. No better argument against totalitarianism was ever recorded.

All through the Bible we find choice bits of economic lore. In the Psalms, for instance, we read of the good shepherd who loves the sheep and cares for them, but “the hireling fleeth, and careth not.” And we are only just beginning to understand that if the hireling had a material

interest in the sheep he might also have a spiritual interest.

The Landmark

In the section known as the Books of Law, one may find the legal aspects of everything from sex to land tenure and taxation. In the fifth chapter of Deuteronomy, the twenty-first verse states, “Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s field.”

This is nicely supplemented in the fourteenth verse of the nineteenth chapter, “In the inheritance which you will hold in the land that the Lord your God gave you to possess, you shall not remove your neighbor’s landmark . . .”

Another significant verse in the legal books is the admonition to set aside a tenth of the yield of the land for the tribe of Levi—“for they have no heritage in the land.” Since the tribe of Levi were the priests, scribes, clerks and workers of the “church” and that constituted the governing body, we have a reasonable facsimile of our own land value tax plan.

In reading the Bible as an adjunct to political economy it should be remembered that we are reviewing an age when the transition from promiscuity to polygamy was at its height . . . when chattel slavery was an accepted institution and where the totalitarian state predominated, and conquering hordes demanded tribute. However, economically and morally, the Bible consistently denounces social injustice, and the philosophy is timeless since it gives a strict cause and effect exposition of human experience.