

BRIAN HOUSTON'S  
HERMENEUTICAL  
JUSTIFICATION FOR  
PROSPERITY

A CRITIQUE OF BRIAN HOUSTON'S HERMENEUTICS  
IN HIS BOOK *YOU NEED MORE MONEY*

AN ESSAY BY STUART MCGREGOR  
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BRIAN HOUSTON'S *YOU NEED MORE MONEY*

The world would be better off  
if people tried to become better.

And people would become better  
if they stopped trying to become better off.

For when everybody tries to  
become better off,  
nobody is better off.

But when everybody tries to  
become better,  
everybody is better off.

Everybody would become rich  
if nobody tried to become richer.

And nobody would be poor  
if everybody tried to be poorest.'

## INTRODUCTION

It seems to me that the Bible's justice of wealth is more concerned with the poor having more, not the rich having less. So pursuing money for greed's sake is rightfully condemned, but if it is possible to pursue money for the betterment of society then it is to be encouraged because the poor will stand to gain. But note the qualifier — “if it is possible” because the Bible is very strong on its warnings about wealth and the great responsibilities of those who possess it. As William Diehl says “Christians need to live a theology of enough . . .”<sup>2</sup> where any *excess* can be distributed for welfare.

Brian Houston's book *You Need More Money* validates and encourages the act seeking God's blessing as a Christian's right—a claim that, I suggest, can only really be substantiated from within the affluence of the West.<sup>3</sup> Disguised by the pietism of seeking wealth to bless others, Houston finds a biblical rationale for capitalism and unfortunately, leaves him wide open for criticism from many angles.

In fairness however, the simple fact is that the Bible does not appear to provide a basis for any one particular political ideal or economic model; it is neither socialist, fascist, capitalist or anarchist etc. Whilst support for any of these *can* be found, there is no cohesive socio-economic system that extends over the entire history of the scriptures.

Capitalism is only a recent idealism and so it makes sense that the gospels of affluence would proliferate especially in the last 50 or so years. Prior to the industrial revolution, economics was primarily reliant upon the subjection of the poor to the desires of the wealthy. Blanketly assuming that 1,000 B.C.E. criticisms of 1,000 B.C.E. economic systems are just as relevant to today's Free Market model is undoubtedly going to be problematic. Simply, some kind of exegesis is required.

For anyone to assume the role of exegete a tremendous amount of humility is required. It is helpful to bear in mind the intention behind opening the Bible in the first place.<sup>4</sup>

“The purpose of biblical interpretation involves not just understanding the specific conscious meaning of the author but also the principle or pattern of meaning he sought to communicate.”<sup>5</sup>

We need to treat the scriptures with the historical respect that they deserve in order to glean from them understanding for our situation today. We need to try and understand what relevance the prosperity proverbs and ‘promises’ had to the situation they were spoken into before we can take any application for today.

I can't see how Brian Houston's exegetical method incorporates this principle. He only seems to bring his own presuppositions about God's benevolence to the text and extracts support from the Bible whatever and wherever he can. Instead of bringing a wealth of knowledge to the text, he simply brings his wealth.

Admittedly he is not of the same ilk as Kenneth Hagin, or Kenneth Copeland (as thought by some who rant and rave at the very sniff of the prosperity gospel).<sup>6</sup> Houston is a reasonable step back. He is not saying to us 'to name it and claim it' though at times he does appeal to the visualisation techniques of pop-culture.<sup>7</sup> But his premise is that Christians should receive God's blessing in the form of prosperity and this is a promise for every Christian. We are to be 'money magnets.'<sup>8</sup>

Unfortunately, his exegesis of most (not all, but most) of his scriptural references is extraordinary and his take on things is really open to question. Space does not permit to look at every instance, but there are a few key passages that I have selected to demonstrate that Houston has not followed basic principles of hermeneutics.<sup>9</sup>

## HIS SELLING POINT

### THE ANSWER FOR EVERYTHING

A feast is made for laughter, and wine makes merry;  
but **money answers everything**[sic].

—Ecclesiastes 10.19

Firstly, I treat with suspicion anyone who has to make bold their point in almost every scripture that they quote from. The point of bolding is to draw the reader to an author's emphasis. This emphasis may or may not be warranted and will distract from the context and alter meaning. For example, the two differences in these sentences:

The boy ran **down** the hill. (emphasises direction)

The **boy** ran down the hill. (emphasises the one running)

This complaint could appear trivial but when quoting anything adding emphasis will predetermine how the reader will read the text. It may be useful in some cases, but I think it is decidedly unuseful when the scripture can (and does) speak for itself. The emphasis I think should come from solid explanation.

On the surface, this proverb jars with many historical Christian attitudes toward money. It undermines the sometimes rampant asceticism that has featured in the history of our faith. Houston's conclusion that it should be read at face value is understandable as it does appear to be explicit, but then, let's have a look at it deeper.

There is disagreement over Qoheleth's (the author of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes) tone in this proverb as he has not been consistent with his thinking toward materialism<sup>10</sup> but consider the possibility that he is being sarcastic—an idea thoroughly consistent with the rest of the book—then the meaning radically changes. Even though the connection between vs. 18 and 19 is obscure it is quite easily seen that the pericope is negatively charged.<sup>11</sup> The support for this is overwhelming.

Kathleen Farmer suggests that verse 19 is an illustration of “the types of mismanagement which might tempt someone into cursing the king. The king or the rich who act as if ‘money answers everything’ may deserve to be cursed, but v. 20 counsels the prudent not to put such thoughts into words.”<sup>12</sup> For Farmer the general attitude of Qoheleth to those who overvalue money is pessimistic and reconciling this verse with that attitude leads to locating interpretation of the verse in the negative context it is found.

Iain Provan offers this translation:

For laughter they prepare food,  
and wine that brings joy to the living;  
and money meets the demands of both.

He is quite clear about the fact that these reflect the previous references to feasting and the carelessness inherent in them. “The implication is that money that may have been well used for ‘house repairs’ has been squandered on partying.”<sup>13</sup>

Michael Eaton suggests the that this verse describes the characteristics of a life of folly because of the Hebrew word order:

For frivolity they make bread,  
and it is wine that rejoices in the living,  
and it is money that is the answer to everything.<sup>14</sup>

Considering the proverb's context we can see that it is a dark caution rather than a pragmatic directive or ‘promise’. It is an example of the priorities of existentialist fools. Qoheleth's purpose in the whole book is to lead up to ‘the end of the matter’ (Ecclesiastes 12.13). That all that will do is to be righteous as a duty to God. He does not promise wealth and benefits or answers, because seeking these and only these, is folly.

Whilst I concede that Houston states that “Naturally speaking, money does affect almost every aspect of our lives,”<sup>15</sup> I am left feeling that he is using this verse as a questionable foundation for the rest of his book.

## PROSPERITY

“Prosperity is a Bible word.”<sup>16</sup>

Even though it is difficult to see what importance a statement like this has—the bible is made up of lots of recurring words—he claims that ‘prosperity’ is a promise proven by Psalm 35.27<sup>17</sup>:

Let the Lord be magnified, who **has pleasure in the prosperity** of his servant.

He is using the New King James Version which renders the word *shalom*<sup>18</sup> as ‘prosperity’. However, *shalom*<sup>19</sup> aligns the meaning of the verse more with peace and life going well than financial gain hence the NRSV translation as ‘welfare’.

He finds further support for ‘prosperity’ being a ‘Bible word’, and therefore effectively a promise of God is shown in Joshua 1.8 (a favourite of advocates of the Prosperity Gospel). His exegesis of the mandate given to Joshua is inadequate. Houston has overlooked the fact God is talking to Joshua as national representative of the Israelites and that the prosperity is being given to Israel when they as a whole abide by the commandments. To isolate Joshua from his socio-political responsibilities is to deny the covenant that God had made with the nation. It can’t be justified to read this as Joshua being singled out to be made prosperous as an individual.

## THE RICH YOUNG RULER

Houston proposes that the traditional interpretation of this is flawed.<sup>20</sup> His case is constructed primarily on his understanding of the response of the disciples. He argues that their astonishment was based upon the Jewish expectation that those who obey the law would become wealthy. He is in some respects quite right as Craig Evans agrees that wealth was often understood as an indicator of covenant blessing not as an obstacle to God.<sup>21</sup> This is why the disciples were astonished, but Jesus did go on to explain. Houston’s biggest error here is where he says:

“They knew that the scriptures said that, “the Lord takes pleasure in the prosperity of his people.’ (Psalm 35:27)”<sup>22</sup>

Houston merely exposes how lightweight he really is, because the Jewish support for their expectation is found in the covenants and the prophets—not in an English translation of the word *shalom*. In spite of this error, I believe that he is close to understanding the astonishment of the disciples.

Consider the fact that the disciples had just acknowledged that Jesus was the Messiah (8.27–29). Presumably wealth would be a tangible result of the freedom the Messiah was to bring (Isaiah 60 esp. 11, 13; Amos 9.13–15)? So when Jesus suggested that it would be difficult for a rich person to get into heaven, it was met with understandable despair. This would explain the strength of feeling with which Peter reacted “We have left everything for you . . .”, and how we see later when the disciples are vying for positions next to Jesus just after the teaching of the ‘first becoming last’.

I suggest therefore, that their world had been turned upside-down and the significance of this story is not in deriding wealth, but stripping away the expectations of what they thought would be consequences of Messianic political emancipation in order to reveal the spiritual significance of the Messiah’s redemption. A paradigm shift was taking place.

Wealth is not evil here, but it is a distraction of the spirit and the Rich Young Ruler was the prime example of an extreme manifestation of this destructiveness. The warning is simple, that living a life according to a law yet divorced from knowing what controls the heart is of no eternal benefit. Houston’s emphasis on the passage being about wealth diminishes the profound nature of its message. The eye of the needle still poses a threatening specter to advocates of accumulating wealth.

Houston appeals to the context of the passage to limit Jesus’ response that nothing is impossible to God as pertaining to rich people only.<sup>23</sup> It is difficult to see how or even why he arrives at this conclusion as it doesn’t make his argument any stronger.

He also skips over vs. 30 where Jesus mentions persecutions. It is simple fact that persecution and wealth do not go together for very long. Jesus is referring to the existence of wealth within the community—note that he does not mention money and the expectation is still that people will own houses so wealth is still not outright condemned.

To Houston’s credit, he must be commended for skipping over claiming ‘the hundredfold principle’, though he still considers this blessing as wealth. At the end of this exegesis he concludes that “What Jesus is saying is that when money *has* people, it is going to inhibit them when it comes to the Kingdom of God, but that is very different to people actually having money.” This is of course

thoroughly in keeping with the text, but he ruins it in the next line "Anyone who puts the Kingdom of God first (be they rich or poor) can expect Bible economics to work in their life NOW."<sup>24</sup> Bible economics? I think that speaks for itself.

#### THE PRODIGAL SON

To illustrate the three different attitudes to money Houston uses the parable of the prodigal son. He suggests that looking at the personality profiles of the Father and the two sons will help us learn more about our own choices. The objection I have to this is that he has amplified a minor aspect of a parable into primary support for something reasonably irrelevant to the message of the parable.

Francis Filas suggests that because the parables are a 'developed comparison' the lesson to be understood should arise out of recognising the two elements of the comparison, one being the story and the other being up for interpretation. Filas also suggests that 'details are to be recognised as such and must be subordinated to the principal lesson.'<sup>25</sup> Houston is looking carefully at the details and reading as much as he can out of them.

The youngest son is 'the Waster'. Houston's conclusion when the son hits rock bottom is that 'it is never too late to turn behaviour around so that money can become the blessing it was intended to be.'<sup>26</sup> I agree that the youngest son is a waster of money, but there is no evidence from the parable that supports Houston's conclusion. Money is not the focus here, rather it is the character of the son.

The oldest son is 'the Hoarder' and to justify this Houston extracts from the text all sorts of motives for the oldest son staying with his father. 'It's obviously cheaper at home. If this were the case one would assume that he was ruled by self and the love of money.'<sup>27</sup> But there is no indication *whatsoever* of why the older brother was at home. In fact the older son was living in the inheritance that his father had given him and as confessed by the father later 'Everything I have is yours . . .' the father was in fact living with the son. But this fact does not serve Houston's personality profile of the oldest son: 'he was obviously a lonely person . . .' Houston then makes the astonishing assertion that 'The Bible doesn't mention what he did with his money, but he obviously kept it all to himself. Living at home meant he didn't have to spend anything either.' Again, the character of the oldest son's responses is limited entirely to financial disappointment when the story says nothing of the sort. I suspect the rage was more to do with the injustice (that admittedly had a financial component) of the embarrassing son being embraced by his father.

The father in the story is 'the User' or the steward. Houston asks how the father could possibly afford a calf and a best robe when he had given all his money away. His conclusion was that the father was "attracting new finance into his life, as well as using it."<sup>28</sup> Which is, according to Houston, what we need to do. I accept his logic on one hand, but it's difficult to think that any father would effectively bankrupt himself. The anomaly is not addressed in the parable, simply because it doesn't need to be as it has no bearing on the over-riding message of the story.

That's his interpretation of the parable of 'The Prodigal Son'. Not once does he mention salvation, redemption, forgiveness, repentance, mercy or grace. Nor does he make connections between the characters and the Pharisees, God, Israel or Gentiles. He doesn't mention any of the other wealth of allegorical and obvious comparisons that have been traditionally ventured to explain the meaning of the parable. Houston focuses on the money aspect of the parable and strips this story of any eternal significance by using it as a 'biblical' example of the three attitudes toward wealth. I have to admit, that it makes my heart heavy to see this kind of treatment of one of the greatest parables of Jesus.

## PROVERBS

Throughout his book Houston refers to the book of Proverbs more than any other book. This is something he shares in common with many other prosperity teachers. Individual Proverbs can easily be isolated from context as their meanings stand on their own, and it's not much of a leap to let these pithy sayings become 'promises' of God. Take for example this "... amazing scripture that proves God wants you to be successful":

A good man leaves an inheritance to his children's children, but the **wealth of the sinner** is stored up for the righteous.

—Proverbs 13.22<sup>29</sup>

This is followed by Houston claiming that he could give us many more scriptures that reveal God's will is for us to be prosperous. The problem with this is that it simply does not work.

Proverbs by their very nature 'teach probable truth, not absolute truth'<sup>30</sup> and as such offer guidance not regulations. This can be evidenced by Proverbs 13.4 where 'the desires of the diligent are fully satisfied.' Many diligent people are made redundant and left wondering what to do next. Many diligent Christian

farmers in underdeveloped countries die destitute. Theology needs to be able to work in every social context—especially when it comes to promises of God.

With specific regard to Proverbs 13.22 Houston offers no explanation and gives no examples of how this might actually happen (except himself!).

## CONCLUSION

“The preoccupation of the gospel of affluence with material wealth is more of a sign of its sociological roots than of its biblical exegesis. In that regard it runs counter to Paul’s warning, ‘Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world’ (Romans 12.1).”<sup>31</sup>

The main thrust of this book is urging us to conform the financial aspects of our faith to the world. There is very little of the ‘upside down kingdom’ expressed by Houston and his exhortation to pursue wealth provides a substantial stumbling block to his fellow Christians. This in my mind is highly problematic.

The following conclusion is harsh, but I really think that a man in his position should take the interpretation of scripture far more seriously than he has. Not once in his book to he refer to any commentator, or footnote any other scholarly source.

The number of hermeneutical problems that I have encountered in Houston’s handling of the scriptures is overwhelming and I am no great scholar. It feels as though I could write a book on it.<sup>32</sup> There are a number of areas where he demonstrates blatant disrespect for the texts he is quoting from. I have highlighted just a few. It is evident that this book has been hacked together with very little thought, not simply based on his exegesis but also on his inconsistent arguments. It is profoundly disturbing that he is the National President of Assemblies of God in Australia where he has oversight<sup>33</sup> of over 900 churches. Possibly more disturbing is that he is the President of Hills Leadership College where he trains leaders in the discipline of handling the Bible.

He has read into the text what is not there, taken verses out of context, surface read his main proof texts, and disregarded genre and historical setting. He undermines the integrity of those who are dedicated to Jesus but live poor and destitute lives because they are under the burden of corrupt governance, famine situations, climatic catastrophes or war. He is self contradictory and above anything disturbingly shallow.

I think his attitude toward personal debt is very telling:

“Don’t give someone else the power over your financial freedom.”<sup>34</sup>

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Yet his church encourages the use of credit cards for donations.<sup>35</sup>  
Go figure.

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FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Peter Maurin, cited by Art Gish, "Decentralised Economics", in *Wealth and Poverty: Four Christian Economic Views*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 152

<sup>2</sup> William Diehl, "The Guided Market System" in *Wealth and Poverty: Four Christian Economic Views*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 105

<sup>3</sup> Walter C., Kaiser Jr., "The Old Testament case for Material Blessings", in *The Gospel and Contemporary Perspectives*, 31

<sup>4</sup> Whether it be 'devotional' or for exegesis, I believe that this still applies.

<sup>5</sup> Robert H. Stein, *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1999), (27

<sup>6</sup> Neil Richardson, *Houstons, We Have a Problem*,  
<http://www.christian-witness.org/archives/van2000/houston1.html>

<sup>7</sup> "People who say 'I could never live in a house like that' probably never will. Go to the nicest street you know, stop at the best house, and imagine yourself living there.", 124

<sup>8</sup> Brian Houston, *You Need More Money: Discovering God's Amazing Financial Plan for Your Life*, (Castle Hill, Australia: Maximised Leadership Incorporated, 1999), 123

<sup>9</sup> These are of course, what I think are the worst examples, but I strongly believe that these representative of his approach as a whole.

<sup>10</sup> Tremper Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 250

<sup>11</sup> Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 252

<sup>12</sup> Kathleen A. Farmer, *Who Knows What is Good?: A commentary on the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, (Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991), 189

<sup>13</sup> Iain Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs: The NIV Application Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 2001), 197

<sup>14</sup> Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes, an Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 138

<sup>15</sup> Houston, *Money*, 2

<sup>16</sup> Houston, *Money*, 20

<sup>17</sup> Houston, *Money*, 20

<sup>18</sup> Robert Davidson, *The Vitality of Worship: A Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 121

<sup>19</sup> Robert Davidson, *The Vitality of Worship: A Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 121

<sup>20</sup> Houston, *Money*, 21

<sup>21</sup> Craig A. Evans, *Word Biblical Commentary: Mark 8.27–16.20*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001), 101

<sup>22</sup> Houston, *Money*, 22

<sup>23</sup> “This verse is quoted for all sorts of things . . . but in context, it relates directly to finances.”, 22

<sup>24</sup> Houston, *Money*, 23

<sup>25</sup> Francis Filas, *Understanding the Parables* (London: Burns and Oates, 1960), 2

<sup>26</sup> Houston, *Money*, 37

<sup>27</sup> Houston, *Money*, 38

<sup>28</sup> Houston, *Money*, 41

<sup>29</sup> Houston, *Money*, 56

<sup>30</sup> William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, Robert L. Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1993), 315

<sup>31</sup> Walter C., Jr. Kaiser, “The Old Testament case for Material Blessings”, in *The Gospel and Contemporary Perspectives* (—————), 34

<sup>32</sup> Perhaps I could sell it for \$18 and really discover God’s amazing financial plan for my life.

<sup>33</sup> A friend of mine pointed out the delightfully ironic double meaning of this word.

<sup>34</sup> Houston, *Money*, 127

<sup>35</sup> “The scripture says God loves cheerful givers, and that’s the spirit under which we’ll be giving tonight, and I’m just gonna believe that the very first night the giving to this conference is going to be awesome . . . I know you’re full of purpose tonight to put the Kingdom of God first, and giving it all, cash, or if you want to write out a cheque please make it out to the Hillsong Conference, and those who want to give with *credit cards, there’s cards, there’s cards on every seat, you’re welcome to fill out the details, put your details of your card there* . . . all our needs, our riches and glory. I speak your promise, I speak your

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blessing into the life of every giver, in the name of Jesus, amen, amen.” —Transcript of a Brian Houston during a service by Kelly Burke, *Sydney Morning Herald*, July 13 2002.

<http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2002/07/12/1026185109962.html>

<sup>36</sup> Roy Harrisville, ‘The Loss of Biblical Authority and Its Recovery’, in Carl E. Braaten Robert W. Jenson ed., *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 60–61

<sup>37</sup> Tom Wright, ‘How can the Bible be Authoritative?’, *Vox Evangelica XXI* (1991), 13