A Biblical Division

An Economic Lesson from Scripture

THE FREEMAN
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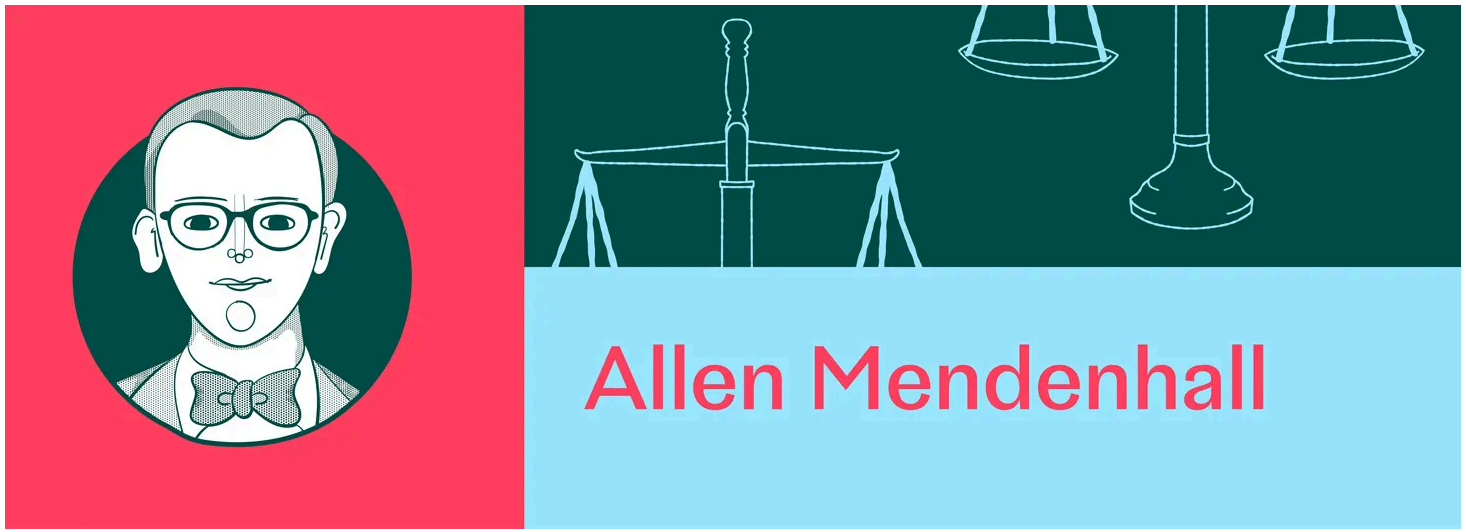

In 2015, I decided, in a quiet rebellion against spiritual lassitude, to read the Bible, Genesis to Revelation, year after year. I acquired one of those chronological Bibles, cunningly divided into daily portions, the whole vast tapestry arranged not as it

appears in the traditional canon but rather in the sequence, or something approaching the sequence, that the ancient narratives and prophecies presumably unfolded in time.

Then came the plague years—Covid, that strange and terrible disruption—and, simultaneously, as if the universe had conspired to unleash maximum chaos, several seismic upheavals in my personal life. The ritual fell away. And during those years of drift, I felt not exactly emptiness, but rather an absence, something vital and familiar missing from the architecture of my days.

So, in November 2024—wouldn't you know it, another period of life-altering turbulence—I retrieved that Bible and began again.

January 1st, naturally, invariably, always opens with those magnificent words: *In the beginning*. This year, though, when I arrived at Exodus 18, something shifted in my perception.

Here was the moment when Moses's father-in-law Jethro—that shrewd old Midianite priest—observes his son-in-law wearing himself to a thread, adjudicating every petty dispute among the multitudes, and offers what can only be called brilliant administrative counsel: restructure the entire judicial apparatus, appoint judges over thousands and hundreds and fifties and tens, let them handle the mundane cases, and Moses himself need only concern himself with the truly difficult matters.

In years past, I had read this passage with my lawyer's hat firmly affixed, contemplating the strictly legal virtues of such reorganization: better evidence-gathering, more consistent application of law, reduced appellate confusion, and so forth.

But this year, for reasons I cannot entirely articulate, I found myself considering Jethro's wisdom through a different lens: economics.

Specifically, the division of labor.

What Moses accomplished in the wilderness, on the advice of his canny father-in-law, was nothing less than what Adam Smith would, millennia later, observe in a Scottish pin factory. Smith noted that when you divided the manufacture of a pin into discrete tasks, each worker specializing in a single operation, productivity multiplied beyond all expectations.

One man draws the wire, another straightens it, a third cuts it, a fourth points it, a fifth grinds the top to receive the head. Eighteen distinct operations, Smith counted, and where one man working alone might produce perhaps 20 pins in a day, 10 men, through this division of labor, could produce upward of 48,000.

Moses did precisely this with justice. He specialized. He delegated. He created a hierarchy not of importance but of efficiency, allowing each judge to become expert in his particular domain, his particular level of complexity.

Then, of course, there is Leonard Read's enchanting "I, Pencil," in which an ordinary yellow pencil narrates its own biography, revealing that no single person on earth knows how to make a pencil—not really, not from scratch.

The wood from California, the graphite from Ceylon, the brass ferrule, the rubber eraser, the yellow lacquer—each component requires specialized knowledge, distributed across continents, coordinated not by any central authority but by the invisible hand of spontaneous cooperation. "Not a single person," the pencil confesses, "among these millions, including the president of the pencil company, contributes more than a tiny, infinitesimal bit of know-how."

What Moses discovered in the desert, what Smith articulated in *The Wealth of Nations*, what Read illuminated with poetic simplicity, is this: human flourishing—whether in matters of justice, manufacture, or the creation of even the humblest implement—depends upon our willingness to acknowledge our limitations and distribute our burdens according to our competencies.

Pride insists that we can do everything ourselves; wisdom understands that we were made to need one another. In the wilderness, in the pin factory, in the making of a pencil, and perhaps even in the reading of an ancient book year after year, we discover that progress, true progress, emerges not from solitary genius but from the patient, unglamorous work of sharing the load, trusting in systems larger than ourselves, and recognizing that the profoundest knowledge is often simply that we cannot do it alone.

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