

'THERE SHALL BE NO POOR AMONG YOU': DEUTERONOMY'S VISION AND THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

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Introduction

President Brushaber, Provost Eliason, members of the faculty, staff, students, and honored guests, it is my privilege to be here this morning. Today obviously marks my presentation to the Bethel community as a member of the faculty, but this is far from the start of my association with Bethel Seminary. It was here, as a student, that my sense of call to teach was identified, affirmed, and nurtured. Many of those who were instrumental in that process are here today, and I am honored and humbled to serve with you now as a colleague, and I am profoundly grateful for your ministry.

I would like to take this opportunity to mention one member of the Bethel community who has had a profound impact on my life and ministry. I can without exaggeration say that were it not for the ministry of love and support of my wife Cami, I would not be here today. She believes in me when I don't believe in myself, and that has made a huge difference.

It was here at Bethel Seminary that I first became "infected" with a passion and love for the Old Testament. It is my hope that some of you here today will, in some small way, be similarly "infected" with a love for the Old Testament, but more importantly, for the great God who has revealed himself through this powerful book. With that in mind, I'd like to spend our time together this morning thinking about an aspect of the Book of Deuteronomy, and then examine how the vision of a 3500 year-old book is relevant to the life of the 21st century church.

Deuteronomy's Vision: 'There Should Be No Poor Among You'

We will begin with an examination of the nature of Deuteronomy's vision. The text that was read for us is from the 15th chapter of Deuteronomy, which, as you well know, contains speeches of Moses given to the people on the eve of their entry into the Promised Land. In this

remarkable book, Moses sets forth a radical vision of what life was to be like lived in the land and in relationship to Yahweh. At its core, Deuteronomy is an exhortation to the people of God to live in a certain way because of their unique relationship with Yahweh. Perhaps the most famous text in Deuteronomy is found in 6:4-9, which forms part of the *Shema* which was recited twice daily by Jews. It is, in a sense, a “Pledge of Allegiance” to Yahweh, in which the people are called to affirm the fact that Yahweh alone is their God, and it calls for single-minded devotion to him in every aspect of life.

In chapter 15, some implications of that single-minded devotion are highlighted. Here, Deuteronomy establishes a vision for a society in which there should be no poor people. Specifically, it calls for the release of debts in the seventh year, and also for the release of slaves, who probably entered servitude because of indebtedness. Although it is debated as to whether this release originally was intended to be a total cancellation of the debt or referred to suspension of demands for payment during the seventh year, there is no doubt that later Jewish tradition understood this to be a complete cancellation of the debt.¹

There are interesting parallels to this law of release in other legal texts in the Old Testament. In Exodus 23, the law states that there is to be a release of the *land*, such that land is not to be cultivated by the landowner in the seventh year. The purpose for this “rest” for the land is so that the poor may harvest the food, and so that wild animals will also be able to eat of it (Ex 23:11). During this year of release, the produce of the land becomes common property, not just belonging to the landowner. Similarly, Leviticus 25 calls for the seventh year to be established as a year of rest—a Sabbath rest—such that the land is not tilled. The parallel law in Deuteronomy 15 is a third law demanding a release of some sort.

It is important to note just what is happening in these three laws. In Exodus and Leviticus, the land is left fallow for a year. In Exodus, there is a clear humanitarian motivation for doing so, namely so that the poor and wild animals will be able to eat of the land. Clearly, this law is present to address the needs of the *landless* poor, since any landowner would be able to eat the produce of their own land, even during the fallow year (as Leviticus makes clear). In Leviticus, the motivation is more religious than humanitarian, although it is possible or even likely that the

¹ C.J.H. WRIGHT, *Deuteronomy*, NIBC (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996), 188. P.C. CRAIGIE, *Deuteronomy*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 236-37, sees this law as referring to the suspension of payments, not a cancellation of the debt itself.

form of the law in Leviticus is making explicit a religious motive that is implicit in the Exodus law.² The humanitarian issues are addressed in other laws in Leviticus 19:9-10 and 23:22, so it would be a mistake to conclude, as some have done, that the concerns of Leviticus are exclusively religious and not humanitarian. In the same way, it would be wrong to conclude that Exodus is devoid of a religious motivation. Most relevant for our purposes, however, is the fact that in Leviticus, as in Exodus, the immediate beneficiaries of the law are landless poor.

The law of release in Deuteronomy 15, however, extends this concern for the poor to include landowners struggling under the crushing burden of debt. It is easy to see how economic pressures could force a struggling landowner to borrow. Failed crops, increased taxation, or simple mismanagement could result in a landowner not being able to meet their obligations, and therefore having to borrow in order to meet those obligations. Continued misfortune could lead to the loss of land and home, or even result in the selling of family members or themselves into slavery in order to pay off debts. The law of release in Deuteronomy 15 is expressly intended to put an end to this course of events. At the end of seven years, debts would be cancelled, and there would be no need for the practice of debt-slavery in order to meet those obligations. Moreover, even if someone were forced into slavery in order to pay off debts, they are to be released in the seventh year, according to the very next law in Deuteronomy 15:12-18. More remarkably, they are to be provided the resources for starting over, as Deuteronomy 15 further calls for them to be generously provided for from the slaveholder's fields and flocks (vv. 13-14). Deuteronomy seeks to prevent the establishment of a permanent poor underclass through its laws of release. In comparison to the prevailing culture of the Ancient Near East, this represents a revolutionary vision for how the people of God are to live.

That Deuteronomy envisions a new kind of society may be further seen in the very terminology used to speak of those in need. Old Testament scholar Norbert Lohfink has noted that Deuteronomy has altered the terminology used to refer to those in need.³ Throughout the Ancient Near East, and in much of the Old Testament except for Deuteronomy, landless groups such as foreigners, widows, and orphans were usually considered to be among the "poor." It is

² C.J.H. WRIGHT, *God's People in God's Land: Family, Land and Property in the Old Testament* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997; repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 146.

³ See N. LOHFINK, "The Laws of Deuteronomy: A Utopian Project for a World Without Any Poor?" Lattey Lecture 1995 (Cambridge: St. Edmund's College, 1995). A more detailed analysis is found in idem, "Das deuteronomische Gesetz in der Endgestalt: Entwurf einer Gesellschaft ohne marginale Gruppen," *Biblische Notizen* 51 (1990): 25-40.

easy enough to see why, since they would have no ready means of support in the form of land or income. So, the terms for “poor” appear commingled with references to “aliens,” “widows,” and “orphans,” the obvious implication being that all are to be thought of as belonging to a single class.⁴ For example, Zechariah 7:10 states “and do not oppress the widow or the orphan, the stranger or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another.” Clearly, a single class is being described.

In Deuteronomy, however, something different occurs. In Ancient Near Eastern texts, the word order “widow and orphan” prevails. This order appears in the Book of the Covenant in Exodus, as well as elsewhere in the Old Testament. In Deuteronomy, however, the order has been altered such that “orphan and widow” is *always* used. In addition, in all but one instance, the word “foreigner” *always* precedes these terms.⁵ Such striking consistency suggests that this was not accidental, but rather was part of a deliberate effort to redefine who was to be considered “poor.” Most striking is the fact, noted by Lohfink, that in no instance in Deuteronomy do any of the 7 Hebrew words for “poor” appear together with the sequence “alien, orphan, and widow.”⁶

In light of these data, I conclude that Deuteronomy is consciously altering the understanding of what it means to be poor. The alien, orphan, and widow, as they are *never* referred to as poor in Deuteronomy, are not to be considered among the poor. Instead, they are simply to be considered people who, due to their circumstances, must be provided for in a different manner. According to Deuteronomy, this is not a “welfare system,” but is, rather, a normal system for the exchange of goods for those who belong to this group.⁷ In this respect, they are thought of as being like the Levites, who also owned no property and who, therefore, relied on an alternative system for provision. Levites were to be given a portion of the bounty of the land through the tithe and through the sacrifices of the people, which were to be the means by which they received support and sustenance. This was not a charitable contribution for people who were “down on their luck”; it was, rather, the normal means, and the God-ordained means, by which the Levites were to be supported.

⁴ LOHFINK, “Laws of Deuteronomy,” 8-9.

⁵ Lohfink mistakenly claims that the word rGE “*always* precedes [the terms for orphan and widow].” Ibid., 8. However, in Deuteronomy 10:18 the term rGE follows the sequence. This is the only exception to the pattern in the whole of Deuteronomy, however.

⁶ Ibid., 9.

The Levites, then, were not to be considered poor. Rather, they were to function in a sense as a barometer for whether Israel was living up to its obligations to support the landless Levites. My friend and mentor Gordon McConville has noted that the Levite is intended in Deuteronomy to be prosperous, not poor. He notes that “a poor Levite could not be an ideal figure, for his poverty, far from portraying devotion to Yahweh, would actually be a consequence of disobedience and godless independence on the part of the whole people, and a harbinger of their deprivation of the benefits of the land.”⁸ Clearly, then, the condition of the Levites is a direct measure of the obedience of the people in living out their relationship to Yahweh in the land. If the people obeyed the commandments Yahweh gave them and shared the bounty of the land with them, the Levites would not be poor in any sense of the word, for Yahweh promised to bless the land. It is only if the people failed to obey that the Levites would be poor.

It appears that the other landless groups could be thought of in much the same way. By steadfastly refusing to consider aliens, orphans, and widows as “poor,” Moses in Deuteronomy is insisting that they be integrated fully into the life of the nation, just as the Levites were to be. They, like the Levites, would serve as a barometer for the obedience of the nation.

But Deuteronomy goes even further than this in its treatment of those who it actually considers to be poor, as opposed to the landless. Deuteronomy 15:1-3, as we have seen, regulates the year of release in order to ensure that there is no permanent underclass in Israel due to indebtedness. We have also already seen how this humanitarian law extends the concept of release to landholding debtors. But it is important to notice that Moses interrupts his treatment of the year of release with an urgent appeal. Verses 1-3 and 7-11 of chapter 15 flow seamlessly in establishing regulations concerning lending practices and the year of release. Verses 4-7 clearly interrupt the flow of the text.

This interruption of verses 4-7 have led many to conclude that these verses are from a different, later hand than the rest of chapter 15.⁹ Many have said, moreover, that these verses contradict the statement in verse 11 that “there will never cease to be poor people in the land,” and conclude that this is further evidence that the two sections derive from disparate sources.

⁷ Ibid., 11.

⁸ J.G. McCONVILLE, *Law and Theology in Deuteronomy* JSOTS 33 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984), 151.

⁹ See, e.g., A.D.H. MAYES, *Deuteronomy* NCB (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 248.

But drawing such conclusions, in my opinion, fails to deal adequately with the rhetorical thrust of Moses' argument and the nature of the Deuteronomic vision.

In interrupting the regulations concerning the year of release, Moses is making a powerful argument for his understanding of what it means for Israel to be the people of God. Verse 4 begins with a restrictive adverb,¹⁰ drawing a contrast with the preceding statement. In doing so, Moses is arguing that the fact of life lived in the land *should* render the law of release unnecessary. The reason, Moses explains, is because God is so going to bless the nation that there will be enough for everyone. If the people are faithful to the covenant they made with Yahweh, there will be enough for all. Note that this blessing is predicated on Israel's careful observation of the "whole command" Moses spoke to the nation (verse 5). Part of that "whole command" that Moses exhorts Israel to obey is the full integration of marginal groups and the poor into the life of the nation.

In effect, Moses is saying that if Israel is truly living as the people of God, then the provisions for the year of release will be utterly unnecessary. Because part of what it means to be the people of God according to the vision of Deuteronomy is to care for one another, and to share the bounty of blessings with the entire community. For this reason, the Levites, aliens, orphans, and widows were not to be considered poor. Their provision was not a charitable act, but was, as we have seen, a normal means of providing for people who had no other means of sustenance. Sharing with these groups was not meritorious, but was expected behavior on the part of the community as a whole. Yahweh would richly bless his people, who would, out of devotion to him, share that bounty with everyone in the community. In this way, there would be no need for debt-slavery, no need for any year of release. The people would treat each other as "brothers," as fellow citizens are consistently referred to in Deuteronomy, and would care for one another accordingly. This is part of Deuteronomy's radical vision for life lived in relationship to Yahweh. And, as God's word, it is part of God's vision for what it means to be the people of God.

What, then, do we make of the statement just a few verses later, that "there will never cease to be poor people in the land"? Should this be taken as an indication of inconsistency on the part of Moses, or evidence of multiple sources being used in the composition of Deuteronomy?

¹⁰ B.K. WALTKE and M. O'CONNOR, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 672.

I maintain that this, too, is part of the radical vision of Deuteronomy. As we have seen, Deuteronomy puts forth a vision of a community of brothers and sisters who are united in their devotion to Yahweh, and as a result of that unwavering loyalty to Yahweh care for each other in profound ways. But Moses is aware that the people – as human beings – can and will fail to live up to the ideal that he sets forth. This is seen elsewhere in Deuteronomy, where Moses in chapters 27 and 28 sets forth blessings and curses, but makes it clear in subsequent chapters that the curses are likely, if not certain, to be experienced by the nation. Indeed, Moses is under no pretense that his audience is likely to heed his words. The expulsion of the people from the land of promise is spoken of as a near-certainty in chapter 4, and the portrait of the people in chapter 9 as “stiff-necked” and “stubborn” is hardly a flattering one, and will hardly inspire confidence that the people were willing and able to obey Moses’ commands.¹¹

I conclude from all these data that Deuteronomy is, in a sense, “eschatological”¹² in its outlook. That is, it envisages a society as it ought to be, and as it one day in fact will be. At the same time it is fully cognizant of the realities of life lived in a fallen world. There is a tension that is maintained between the ideal and the present reality. In this sense it may be compared to the New Testament conception of the kingdom of God, which is at once “already” and “not yet.” The tension, though difficult to grasp at times, is thoroughly biblical.

In light of this, verses 4 and 11 in Deuteronomy 15 are not contradictory, but rather should be seen as two halves of the same radical vision. Ideally, there should be no poor among the people of God, since there will be abundant blessing and because the people are to be a true community of loyal Yahweh worshippers in which *all* are welcomed, *all* are included, and *all* are cared for. But human beings are incapable of such perfect selflessness, and so there will never cease to be poor in the land. So, recognizing that fact, a selflessness short of the ideal is commanded, in the form of a release of debts and generous lending. In addition, Deuteronomy seeks to minimize the impact of the failure of the people to live selflessly through the law of release of slaves in the

¹¹ For further development of this idea, see J.G. MCCONVILLE, “Deuteronomy: Torah for the Church of Christ,” *European Journal of Theology* 9,1 (2000): 39-42.

¹² I am indebted to Gordon McConville for this insight, shared in a private conversation. Cf. Also WRIGHT, *Deuteronomy*, 189.

seventh year. One day, however, the ideal will be realized, and Yahweh himself will enable the people to live out their relationship with him in conformity to his commands.¹³

Deuteronomy's Vision and the Christian Church

We now must evaluate briefly how this radical vision of Deuteronomy relates to the 21st century church. In doing so, we must bear in mind the important fact that Deuteronomy is not addressed directly to the Christian church. It is addressed to the people of Israel, assembled on the verge of the promised land. While there is relevance for the church in the vision of Deuteronomy, we must remember the nature of the people of God has changed through the ministry of Jesus, who redefined the people of God around himself.

Despite this Christological redefinition of the people of God, there is substantial evidence to suggest that the early church considered care for the poor in general, and Deuteronomy's vision in particular, to be of great relevance and importance. Time constraints, coupled with my very limited expertise on matters related to the New Testament, will necessitate that we look at just a couple of examples.

In Acts chapters 2 and 4, Luke provides summary descriptions of the early Christian community. In Acts 2:44-47, Luke describes the community as having "all things in common." Also included is a description of the practice of selling possessions and sharing the proceeds with those who had need (Acts 2: 45). In Acts 4:34, Luke notes that "there was not a needy person among them," due to the fact that property was sold and the proceeds shared among the community.

In Acts 4:34, the wording in Greek is identical to the Septuagint's rendering of Deuteronomy 15:4, except for modification of the verb from future to past tense. That is, Deuteronomy 15:4 says "there *shall be* no poor among you," whereas Acts 4:34 says "there *were* no poor among them." This correspondence suggests that Luke was deliberately invoking Deuteronomy 15:4 and implies that Luke saw the early Christian community described in Acts 4 as being governed by Deuteronomy's vision.¹⁴ The early Christian community described by Luke sought to model

¹³ That Yahweh will enable obedience is seen in comparing Deut 10:16 and 30:6. The God who in Deuteronomy 10:16 commands the people to circumcise their hearts and obey the commands is the same God who in 30:6 is identified as the one who will do the circumcising, thus enabling obedience.

¹⁴ See J.A. FITZMYER, *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation With Introduction and Commentary* AB, v. 31 (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 314. See also R.N. LONGENECKER, "The Acts of the Apostles," in *Expositor's Bible*

the kind of inclusivity and brotherhood exhorted by Moses in Deuteronomy. Though the circumstances were radically different, the early church sought to live out the kind of community envisaged in Deuteronomy. Indeed, Luke may well have understood the early church to be the fulfillment of the eschatological vision of Deuteronomy.¹⁵

What are the facets of the Deuteronomic vision that are embraced by the early church and which, consequently, have relevance to the church today? There are several, but for the sake of time I will highlight just three of the most important ones.

First, there is an emphasis on full participation in the life of the community for all people, regardless of their economic status. As we have seen, Deuteronomy calls for the complete integration of orphans, widows, slaves, Levites and the poor into the life of the nation. For Israel to be the people of God, there must not be any sense of exclusion. The early church lived this out in providing for the needy such that poverty was eliminated from the community, according to Acts 4:34. We who are the modern church must, I submit, ensure that economic barriers and disparity do not hinder full integration of people into the life of the church.

Second, care for the poor is seen as integral to the life of the community. That is, this is not an optional afterthought, or something that is “nice” to do if one gets the chance. Rather, as we have seen, the way the poor and landless groups are cared for functioned as a measure of how the people were doing in living out their relationship with Yahweh. Given the emphasis on care of the poor in the *Torah* and the prophets, we can conclude that this is important to God (to put it mildly). There is nothing to suggest that this concern is eliminated because of the Christological redefinition of the people of God in the New Testament. On the contrary, the fact that concern for the poor is highlighted as an attribute of the early church suggests that it was understood to be a matter of great importance. Therefore, concern for the poor is something that the church needs to integrate into the very fabric of its existence. Living out relationship with God necessarily includes caring for others within the community.

Commentary, vol. 9, ed. F. GAEBELEIN (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 310. Note that this understanding of Luke’s use of Duet 15:4 in the LXX comports with the criteria for identifying an “echo” of the Old Testament in the New as suggested by R.B. HAYS, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 29-32. I am grateful to my colleague Prof. Don Verseput for pointing me to this work.

¹⁵ A.C. MITCHELL, “The Social Function of Friendship in Acts 2:44-47 and 4:32-37,” *JBL* 111,2 (1992): 255-72, argues that Luke was reinterpreting Greco-Roman friendship traditions in light of LXX traditions in an effort to persuade his audience to embrace a new model of communal friendship that eliminated any sense of expectation of reciprocity and encouraged friendships across social boundaries. This comports well to the Deuteronomic vision described above.

Finally, the blessings of God are understood as being for the benefit of the community, not exclusively or even primarily for the individual recipients. In Deuteronomy, it was expected as a matter of course that the blessings of the land would be shared among the entire community. God promised that there would be enough for everyone, if the people would obey him and care for one another. In using the way in which landless groups and the poor were cared for as a measure of the obedience of the people, the communal nature of the blessing can be readily seen. The blessing was meant for all! In the same way, the owners of property in the early church appear to have seen their property as a means by which the entire community could be blessed and served, and they sold what they owned in order to share. This aspect of Deuteronomy's vision is of particular importance to us as wealthy American Christians. We must come to recognize that we have been so incredibly blessed not because of our righteousness or for our benefit, but rather so that we might use these blessings to care for others. The community to which we have an obligation is found throughout the world, and we must remember that we are blessed in part so that we can share with those brothers and sisters who have little, or who have nothing. And *this is not charity*; it is simply the means by which God has chosen to provide for others throughout the world. If care for the poor and the sharing of blessings continues to be a measure of the obedience of the people of God (and I believe it is), then I fear that the American church has a great deal of work to do in this regard, for there is *much* room for improvement.

Conclusion

Our time is now gone, though there is much that remains to be said about the relevance of this vision for the modern church. Today is Passover, which means that tomorrow we commemorate the sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross, for our sakes, and on Sunday we will celebrate the greatest event in human history. As we contemplate Jesus' resurrection, our thoughts naturally turn toward what it means to live in relationship with a God who gave so much for us. We have seen here this morning that concern for the poor is an important part of the vision of Deuteronomy, and is, moreover, an important part of what it means to be the people of God both prior to and since the first Easter. It is my fervent prayer that the modern church will embrace this vision, and will honor our risen Savior by working diligently to ensure that "there are no poor among us."