

Justice and the Marginalized

Deuteronomy 24:10-21

January 30, 2022

We have in *Deuteronomy* the “second” (hence Deutero-) giving of the Law. Many of the passages have parallels in Exodus and elsewhere in the earlier books of the Torah. Many of the laws given have as their primary concern the protection of those who are not in positions of power. An example is those laws concerning divorce, just prior to the scripture passage for today. They serve to give some protection. Other laws similarly limit the scope of the powerful to act against those in positions of weakness. Indeed, the whole point of Law is to protect those who may lack power, or limit the arbitrary actions of the powerful. The powerful don’t need the Law, in the sense that in the absence of law they could do what they wanted. But even the powerful are helped by law, because there is almost always someone else more powerful still. In the presence of lawlessness, society falls apart, people become unproductive, and death and suffering follows. Oppressive laws, designed to benefit the powerful at the expense of the weak, are hardly better. The Hebrew Law is amazing, for its time, in its consideration of the poor, the weak, and the alien.

24¹⁰ When you make your neighbor a loan of any kind, you shall not go into the house to take the pledge. ¹¹ You shall wait outside, while the person to whom you are making the loan brings the pledge out to you. ¹² If the person is poor, you shall not sleep in the garment given you as^[a] the pledge. ¹³ You shall give the pledge back by sunset, so that your neighbor may sleep in the cloak and bless you; and it will be to your credit before the Lord your God.

¹⁴ You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy laborers, whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land in one of your towns. ¹⁵ You shall pay them their wages daily before sunset, because they are poor and their livelihood depends on them; otherwise they might cry to the Lord against you, and you would incur guilt.

¹⁶ Parents shall not be put to death for their children, nor shall children be put to death for their parents; only for their own crimes may persons be put to death.

¹⁷ You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice; you shall not take a widow's garment in pledge. ¹⁸ Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this.

¹⁹ When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings. ²⁰ When you beat your olive trees, do not strip what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow.

²¹ When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not glean what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. ²² Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I am commanding you to do this.

a. [Deuteronomy 24:12](#) Heb lacks *the garment given you as*

The first our verses of this passage concern debt. Taking interest on a loan to “a brother” (fellow Israelite) is forbidden in Deuteronomy 23:19-20. But a loan could be made against something given as security. (There's an interesting example of this in Genesis 38 15-20, albeit from an earlier era.) Verse 10 forbids the lender from entering the debtor's house to take the item pledged as security. The “collateral” (to use the modern expression) must be surrendered willfully by the borrower. This prevents the arbitrary seizure of property in the home, even if it was pledged. Furthermore, if someone was so poor that they had to pledge their garment, for example to obtain food, the lender was not allowed to hold that garment overnight. Compared to today, garments were expensive and important property. Weaving fabric was very labor-intensive. A cloak might be a poor person's most valuable possession. Borrowing money for food for the day might require a loan secured by that cloak. The daily pay would hopefully pay off the loan, but if it didn't, say the laborer could not find work, his cloak had to be returned for cover for the night. The Exodus 22:27 version of this law adds:

²⁷ for it may be your neighbor's only clothing to use as cover; in what else shall that person sleep? And if your neighbor cries out to me, I will listen, for I am compassionate.

The point in Deuteronomy 24:14-15 also concerns justice for the poor.

Withholding someone's wage, when those wages were needed to buy food, was life-threatening. What could justify that? This is the situation Jesus seems to have in mind in his parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matt 20:1-16). In Jesus's parable, the vineyard owner pays each worker a full daily living wage, one silver Shekel, even those who started late. This didn't seem fair to those who had worked all day. It seemed inequitable, since in pay per hour of work, they got less. The vineyard owner would have been within the Law of Deuteronomy 24:15 if he had given the later hired workers less. Our sense of fairness, and God's, may not be the same. God is merciful. God goes beyond "justice" in his love and caring for us.

Verse 16 would seem unnecessary to us. But in a semi-nomadic society, this kind of thing happens. Examples are *Joshua 7:24-25* (Achen's sin) and *II Samuel 21:1-9* ("justice" on Saul's sons). Later, the prophets articulated that only the sinner should die, not his son or his father (*Ezekiel 18*).

Verse 17 concerns the alien, the orphan, and the widow. These were outside the normal considerations of law, which focused on adult male Israelites. An alien was someone who wasn't an Israelite. In most societies he (or she) would be completely undefended should someone decide to rob or kill him, unless a treaty extended protection under the authority of the king or ruler. This was Ruth's situation when she returned with Naomi from Moab. When Boaz told her to stay close to his reapers, he wasn't being unnecessarily protective (*Ruth 2:8-9*). As an alien young widow, she would, in most societies of that era, have been "fair game." Even in the territory of Judah, there was still such danger. *Deuteronomy, Exodus, Leviticus*, and elsewhere in the *Bible*, say that God's laws of the Covenant protect such people.

Verse 18 is a key to this whole section, and a similar explanation is given in many other places. **¹⁸ Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this.** The lesson writer puts it, "We are to *do unto others as has been done unto us.*" (p. 51) God redeemed Israel from desperate slavery in Egypt, brought them through the trials of the wilderness, and gave them Canaan, a good land, to live in. Therefore, the Israelites were to not do as the Egyptians did to them, but as God provided for them. They are similarly to care as God cares.

To an unbeliever, the natural human way of doing things, the standard would have been the Egyptian one. The Egyptians oppressed the Israelites, so if the

Israelites ever got the chance, they should return to the Egyptians at least that and more. And maybe to others too. Sometimes that seems to be the standard applied in our day. “What he did is understandable, because, look at his background.” We who follow God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, are expected to try to emulate God’s concerns. Not to try to get one up on anyone who wrongs us.

Further, Jesus taught us to do more. The lesson writer’s “*do unto others as has been done to us*” (p. 51) isn’t enough. Jesus says “**In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.**” (Matt 7:12) Notice the difference in sequence. Jesus says we are to act first in kindness, assuming that’s what we want to receive in return. The “*as has been done to us*” waits for the other before returning the favor, if we wait on the other before acting. Jesus is telling his listeners that we should do as God has done, in loving others as God has first loved us. The Law understands this. It was God’s action that came first, starting with Abraham, in the case of the Israelites, and for their descendants, the Jews. He led them out of slavery in Egypt. So they are expected to act in grace toward those who are similarly powerless: the orphan, the alien, and the widow.

Verses 19 to 22 are the specific laws that provide for the poor. A modern farmer would see these laws as mandating inefficiency. Isn’t the goal in farming to squeeze out as much produce as one can from the land? Why leave anything behind to waste? Well, in those days it wasn’t waste. The poor depended on gleaning these leftovers for sustenance. Notice that the law here doesn’t command that the farmer give the poor of the bread or oil and wine, the end products of his efforts. The poor still have to work to obtain their food. Gleaning the leftover grain, or picking grapes or olives that didn’t fall during harvesting, were more work than the farmer would have needed in the main harvest. The gleaned grain would still need to be prepared, ground and baked, to make bread. That was all work. But, it would be enough to sustain someone who was in a dire situation. Again, we can return to Naomi and Ruth as an example. Verse 21 says of these resources, “it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow.” Verse 22, yet again, reminds the Israelites the reasons for these laws: they were slaves in Egypt before the LORD brought them out. (This provision is so important that it appears multiple times in the Law, twice in Leviticus as well.)

In thinking about these laws, and God explaining why they are to be obeyed due to their own history, I have found myself wondering, “What would the Israelites have been like if they had never had the sojourn in Egypt, or the Jews, had

they not experienced the Exile? Why should they care for the alien if they had never been aliens themselves? Or the widow or orphan, if there were no widows or orphans among their own people? It was in those experiences that the Israelites, and the Jews later, were prepared to receive and understand God's love and mercy. They would have been like a man or woman who grows up well into adulthood without ever experiencing hardship or stress. How can such a person understand and empathize with those who have experienced hardship and loss? There do seem to be such people, whose lives and touch are golden, and whose every effort seems crowned with success. And, so often, when trouble does come for them, it is very bad indeed. Consider, for example, how so many of the celebrities of our day are struggling with drugs, fitness fads, depression, and worse. Or, whose children, growing up in privileged but in often torn and tattered families, are struggling.

Joseph in Egypt prophesied a famine. His family sought refuge in Egypt and they were saved by God's grace. I don't believe God purposely subjected them to oppression there. But out of that oppression, God found a way to turn things for good, that the Israelites would understand the meaning and need for these laws in Deuteronomy. I am reminded that Paul wrote to the Romans, 8:28: **We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.** In the slavery endured by these ancestors in our faith, in Egypt, and in the Exile as well, we can see from our current perspective that these words Paul wrote have been so. We can trust God in our day too. We need but follow Jesus and seek to be faithful disciples to His message. God will be with us wherever that path may go.

Prayer: Steadfast God, in gratitude for all your blessings, we rededicate our lives to you. As we continue on our sacred journeys, kindle within us a generosity of spirit that we may learn to see your face in those around us. May your compassion guide us to work for peace, wholeness, and justice on their behalf. Amen.